

# THE HOUSE IN MARSH ROAD

William Randell

# Laurence Meynell

A COLLINS THRILLER

When Mary Engleton unexpectedly inherited a house in Essex, together with a modest capital sum, it seemed that the long, miserable trail of unpaid bills, bilked landladies and of Arthur's endless "subterfuges" to keep a roof over their heads had at last come to an end. Now he would have the quiet and leisure to establish himself as a writer and she herself could achieve peace of mind. For two reasons things worked out very differently: Arthur met the evil, attractive Valerie Stockley and became obsessed by her, almost—it seemed—spellbound; and the house itself, Platts, was . . . strange. Things were moved about, curtains drawn, bells rung. Arthur was too self-centred to pay attention to the house, and to Mary it seemed that, in spite of everything, Platts welcomed her. But Arthur was driven by a force which he could no longer fight even if he had had the will to do so. Greed, lust and weakness led him deeper into wickedness until he was finally committed to murder. Only then was he forced to face up to the power which occupied Platts, and by that time there was no going back.

Laurence Meynell has written a chilling and fascinating story which combines all the best elements of a Thriller with a twentieth-century ghost story of subtle power and conviction.

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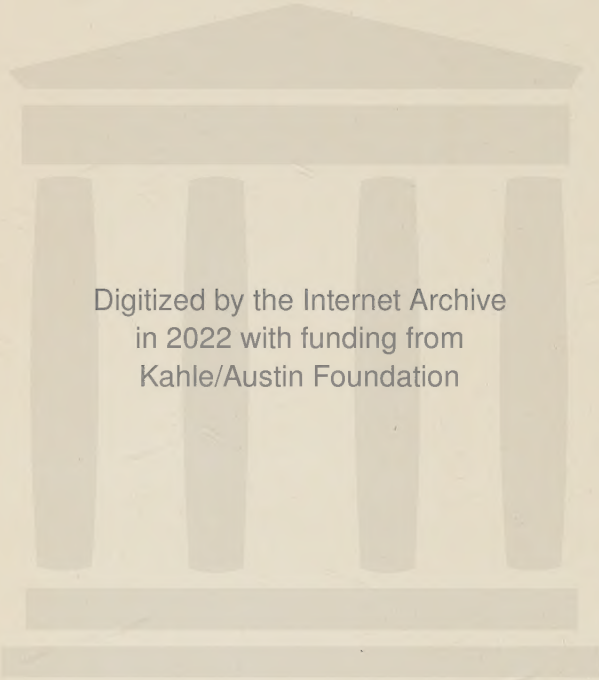
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*A Thriller Novel*

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## *Thriller*

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WHEN Jean Engleton unexpectedly inherited a house in Essex, together with a modest capital sum, it seemed that the long, miserable trail of unpaid bills, bilked landladies and of Arthur's endless "subterfuges" to keep a roof over their heads had at last come to an end. Now he would have the quiet and leisure to establish himself as a writer and she herself could achieve peace of mind. For two reasons things worked out very differently: Arthur met the evil, attractive Valerie Stockley and became obsessed by her, almost—it seemed—spellbound; and the house itself, Platts, was . . . strange. Things were moved about; curtains drawn; bells rung. Arthur was too self-centred to pay attention to the house; and to Jean it seemed that, in spite of everything, Platts welcomed her. But Arthur was driven by a force which he could no longer fight even if he had had the will to do so. Greed, lust and weakness led him deeper into wickedness until he was finally committed to murder. Only then was he forced to face up to the power which occupied Platts and by that time there was no going back.

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### *By the Same Author*

THE PIT IN THE GARDEN	THE ABANDONED DOLL
ONE STEP FROM MURDER	THE BREAKING POINT
SATURDAY OUT	GIVE ME THE KNIFE
WHERE IS SHE NOW?	TOO CLEVER BY HALF
THE FRIGHTENED MAN	DANGER ROUND THE CORNER
THE ECHO IN THE CAVE	THE MAN NO ONE KNEW
PARTY OF EIGHT	THE LADY ON PLATFORM ONE
ETC., ETC.	

# THE HOUSE IN MARSH ROAD

*by*

LAURENCE MEYNELL



COLLINS

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## CHAPTER I

"I'VE GOT some research work to do at the British Museum so my wife and I want accommodation in this district."

"How long would you be wanting the room for?" the landlady asked. "As it happens I have got a couple of rooms I could let you look at; but of course I'm not keen on letting just for a night or two."

Arthur Engleton smiled reassuringly. "Good gracious me, no. A night or two would be no use to me. It will take me at least six months to get the material together for my book."

"Oh, well, in that case——"

Mrs. Norris, who owned and managed the Bellmont Private Hotel in Slade Street, Bloomsbury, was considerably impressed by the man standing in her hall.

She was still old-fashioned enough to think of people in terms of "gentleman" or "not-gentleman." It is true that a hard school had forced her to classify human beings into the even more elemental divisions of payers and non-payers; but she still flew the flag of gentility as bravely as she could, and there was no doubt in her mind that the man now inquiring about a room for himself and his wife qualified for the title "gentleman."

Admittedly when he opened his mouth to speak you couldn't help being aware of teeth which obviously needed a visit to the dentist, and there was a certain tremulousness about the movements of his hands which was not very convincing, and then there were his clothes which Mrs. Norris, an expert in assessing such things, summed up as a good West End suit racked out now by

over-frequent daily use and lack of attention; but still, by birth and pedigree, a good suit.

Mrs. Norris could easily relate all this to the concept which was beginning to form in her mind of a learned man of good birth, a university professor perhaps with a brother a bishop? who was engaged in writing one of those fat and, as far as she personally was concerned, useless books for which prolonged attendance at the reading-room of the B.M. was necessary.

Because decayed teeth, trembling hands and shabby-ing suit didn't alter the fact that Arthur Engleton had good bones to his face. There was something there. You looked twice at him, and what remained with you principally was some quality of the eyes. His brown eyes had an angry vitality in them and a sense of power that left you even on casual acquaintance surprised and faintly disturbed.

"So naturally," Arthur Engleton said, "if we are going to stay for some time we want to be as comfortable as possible."

Mrs. Norris said she saw that. She responded by a slight automatic professional brindling, the instinctive defensive gesture of the harassed landlady.

"I'm sure we always do our best to make *everybody* comfortable at the Bellmont," she said.

Arthur Engleton said he was sure of it, too, and what rooms were actually available?

"Well, as it happens, but of course I could only consider it if you wanted it for a long let, my best double room came free this morning."

"How very fortunate."

"Of course, being what it is it's the most expensive room in the house——"

"Could we see it?" Mr. Engleton asked and Mrs. Norris felt almost abashed. He had been too polite to say so but he had certainly implied that the question of money, although no doubt it would have to be discussed



sometime, was (a) rather ill-bred and (b) not particularly relevant.

Mrs. Norris's belief that he might well have a brother a bishop was considerably strengthened and suffered only a very temporary set-back from the sudden glimpse she got of Mrs. Engleton's face.

Mrs. Engleton, the wife—Mrs. Norris presumed she was really his wife, though of course these days you never could be really sure and so long as they *said* they were married and behaved themselves it was nothing to do with her—had hitherto not said a thing.

She didn't say anything now, but for half a second an expression flitted across her handsome face which faintly disturbed Mrs. Norris. She thought she was beginning to get somewhere in her assessment of the man, but so far, she had to admit, she didn't know what to make of the woman with him.

This merely confirmed a belief to which Mrs. Norris firmly adhered, that it was generally possible, one way or another to get on with a man but that women were always difficult.

Up in the best room the landlady found that she had to make apologies because the place had not yet been properly tidied after the departure of its previous occupants.

Arthur Engleton listened and from his expression it might be presumed that he was willing to overlook the matter.

"It's a pleasant enough room," he said, "but on the small side."

His wife listened to this criticism without giving away by the flicker of an eyelid what she thought of it.

"How much do you charge for it?" Mr. Engleton asked.

Mrs. Norris told them what she charged. She always tried to mention money in a completely toneless voice but she never quite succeeded in keeping a faint hint

of aggression out of her words, as though she expected a protest about the amount and was prepared instantly to defend it.

Arthur Engleton didn't protest about the amount at all; but his wife said:

"The only thing is it's right on the road."

"It's the front room," Mrs. Norris pointed out.

"Something at the back might be quieter——?"

"I *have* a room at the back——"

If the best front room had been thought "on the small side" what would be the verdict on the back room which really *was* a bit poky, Mrs. Norris wondered; but no comment was made and when she stated the price for it Mr. Engleton merely said:

"I expect you would like to be paid something in advance, wouldn't you?" and brought out a note-case comfortably full of notes, many of them, as Mrs. Norris's sharp eyes told her, fivers.

The sight of that well-stocked case reassured her completely. She was prepared to believe that not only was this man's brother a bishop but that he was a bishop with a good living.

She prided herself on knowing when to be "keen" with people and when not.

"That's quite all right, Mr. Engleton," she said, "I always let my guests have their bills each Friday after breakfast and I like to have everything settled the same evening."

Mr. Engleton smiled his agreement and put his expensive looking note-case back in his pocket. It was one of his most useful properties. It contained at that moment a pound note and two ten-shilling notes which, together with about fifteen shillings of change in a trouser pocket, represented pretty well the Engletons' entire wealth in the world. The "fivers" which had so favourably impressed Mrs. Norris were "stage money" which would not have stood up to close inspection but

which only half seen and from a few feet away were remarkably effective.

The Engletons' two large suitcases occupied most of what spare space there was in the room.

"When my trunk comes on from Oxford," Arthur Engleton said, "and I get it unpacked you'll be able to store it somewhere downstairs for us perhaps?"

"Yes, of course."

The door shut behind Mrs. Norris and the man and woman were alone, in another small and shabby room in another small and shabby hotel, living by the usual small and shabby tricks—suddenly Jean Engleton saw it all as an unutterably dreary and frightening pattern.

She lay back on the bed with her hands clasped behind her head and looked incuriously and unexpectantly around.

She could have written a description of the room without ever opening her eyes in it. Lousy brown wallpaper; Woolworth lampshade in the corner a cracked basin with ugly plumbing which just sufficiently justified the "hot and cold water in every room" slogan outside the front door. She didn't even have to try the drawers in the chest of drawers to know that they would stick and be awkward to open, nor the insufficient wardrobe to be sure that it would be just too narrow for a proper coat-hanger.

She studied the man who had brought them there as he had brought them to a dozen similar ones beforehand.

She wasn't sure now whether she loved him or hated him. And that almost made her laugh until she remembered that the one thing sure—unacknowledged but sure—about the relationship between them was that she feared him. At certain times and in certain moods she feared him.

She reached for her bag and fumbled for a cigarette. She lit it, inhaled with deep content—tobacco meant a



lot to her—and watched the blue cloud of smoke swirl up towards the cracked plaster of the ceiling.

Then she dropped her eyes and watched the man again, idly and yet with a sort of intent curiosity; as though suddenly they were nothing to one another and she were looking at a stranger.

He was forty-three and he was a liar. He was also extremely talented. She thought she had got past the stage of believing in his plans and unfounded hopes; but she hadn't quite. She never would, quite. There was always just enough possibility about the job he expected to land, about the man he was going to contact, to make you believe again. Or was there? Had they perhaps, in this fifth-rate private hotel in a side street of Bloomsbury, come to the end?

Arthur was unpacking, i.e. drawing a bottle of Scotch out of the shabbier of the two cases with infinite caution.

He held it up to the light to learn the bad news. And it *was* bad news. The bottle was not more than a third full.

He poured a fair-sized drink into the thick and unattractive tooth-glass and held it out towards Jean with an inquiring look.

She shook her head.

He didn't pretend to conceal his relief.

"You must, I suppose?" she said.

"Yes, I must." He did so and the tonic to his whole system was so immediate and so evident that, watching, the woman didn't know whether she envied or pitied him.

"Well, all that passed off in a highly satisfactory manner," her husband said, now quite cheerful. "We are here. We're in. Wonderful what the sight of a few fake fivers will do. We shall be able to stall at the end of the first week and probably pay something at the end of the second——"

"Don't make me laugh."

"P.V. must want some reviews done next week; he as good as told me he would."

"P.V. only says things like that to get you out of his office."

"You're not very complimentary this morning; and as it happens you are wrong. There's a distinct possibility that P.V. will give me a permanent job."

The very words "permanent job" were so unreal, when related to the way of living to which she was becoming accustomed, that Jean wouldn't let herself consider them seriously.

Instead she stretched, looked up at the ceiling and said wearily: "Arthur, are we always going on like this?"

The man lowered himself on to the bed and sat there, the thick glass, with a good taste of neat whisky still in it, in his hand.

She studied him. A fleck or two of grey showed over his temples. At forty-three, she supposed, it was to be expected. As a matter of fact it would suit Arthur to be grey. He would look almost distinguished. She was still sure of it. She was filled suddenly with fury against the lack in him, whatever it was, that had always prevented him from making good.

"Are we always going on like this?" she repeated.

He held out his hand without speaking and she gave him a cigarette out of her bag. He never had any of his own.

"I don't see why we should," he said. "Really, I don't."

She was infuriated by his senseless optimism which had a habit of bubbling up at moments when it could least be justified.

"And in any case," he continued, "what do you mean by 'like this'?"

"For God's sake, Arthur——"

"We're settled here——"

"Settled!"

"—for two or three weeks at least. I know I shall get some reviewing during that time and we may well find that we can stay on here indefinitely."

"God forbid!"

"I wonder what the loo is like, and the bathroom. Most hotels in this country are still barbaric in all these things."

"There are plenty of places that aren't barbaric, if you can afford to go to them."

Arthur smiled suddenly, a carefree confidential smile that the woman found intensely irritating.

"Quite true. But I haven't got any money."

"And what's so funny about that?"

He jumped off the bed with an abrupt movement and began to walk up and down, a few paces each way only because of the cases, filled with sudden nervous irritation and energy.

"God almighty, when you think of the half-wits who *have* got money. Look at P.V. Why, he isn't even educated. I could do his job on my head in my spare time and they pay him fifteen hundred a year."

"Will he really give you some reviewing to do next week?"

"Yes. A whole batch of books. He promised them."

"Not that reviewing will do much for us if they only pay you what you say they do for it."

"I don't fix the rates of payment. I only supply what any paper finds it difficult to get these days, first-rate, intelligent reviewing done by somebody who knows what he's talking about."

"I wish they'd pay you first-rate, intelligent money for it."

"Oddly enough so do I."

"Because I can't go on with this sort of life much longer, Arthur."

He turned and looked at her; the cold appraising look



of a man taking stock of a piece of property, she thought. She didn't meet his eyes. She disliked those eyes.

"I think you are being very unreasonable——"

"Unreasonable! What are you going to tell me? that we are fixed up here for three weeks——"

"Well, we are, aren't we."

"Three whole weeks before we have to flit again——"

"We may not have to."

"You can't expect me, you can't expect anyone, to go *on* hoping, Arthur."

He was silent for a moment and then said: "I suppose not."

"What will happen when the Venice people find out where we are? "

"Venice. God, what a name for a dump like that. They won't find out. Why should they? "

"They might. It isn't all that far away."

"They won't. But if they ever did we owe them three weeks' rent. All right. It's not the end of the world. And I shall probably have enough money by then to pay them, anyway."

"How shall we ever have enough money to pay anybody? "

"If I could get six months' peace and quiet somewhere to write my book——"

"That book——! "

"You don't believe in it, do you? You don't believe I *can* write a book. You don't believe I'm capable of doing one damned thing."

"I think you're capable of doing lots of things, Arthur——"

"If only I didn't drink."

"All right, you've said it, if only you didn't drink."

He crossed the room, took the bottle of Scotch off the mantelshelf and replenished his glass.

Her heart couldn't have been completely dead about him, she supposed, because she winced a little at the

deliberate brutality of the action; there was a hurt inside her when he did it.

"Which just proves what a bloody fool you are," he told her. "How often have you seen me drunk?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Perhaps twice."

"In how long?"

"Nine years, Arthur. Nine long years."

"There you are then."

She gave a hopeless little laugh. There wasn't much mirth in it, just an acknowledgment of the futility of things.

"And by the way I want you to do something for me, for us."

"For us?"

"You remember that Mervyn Hope-Smith owed me five pounds for the books he bought off me?"

"I remember that you said he did."

"A nice distinction; but as it happens you are wrong. Hope-Smith owes me the money and what is more he has paid it."

She half sat up. The possession of five pounds was an event in their life. It had come to that.

"When?" she demanded suspiciously.

"By the devil's own bad luck, yesterday."

"*Bad* luck?"

"He put a fiver, a real one, in an envelope and posted it to me at the Venice."

She stared at him.

"It'll be waiting on the bench in the hall."

"And what do you want me to do about it?"

"Go and get it."

"What, just ring the front-door bell and ask that old Hardcastle bitch to give it me?"

"No. I wouldn't do it that way. I think it can be managed much more neatly than that. Those two old tabbies on the ground floor go out for their afternoon potter around the square as regular as clockwork. They're

always back at four or within a few minutes of it for tea. All you've got to do is to hang about outside from say a quarter to four onwards and when you see them coming back to the Venice follow them in."

"Mrs. Hardcastle may have told them about us."

"And she may not. On the whole landladies don't like to advertise bad guests. Just smile sweetly at the tabbies, slip in with them, pull the letter out of the rack and come out again. It shouldn't take you more than a minute all told."

"It wouldn't take *you* more than a minute all told. Why don't you go?"

"Don't be a fool, Jean. There's a damned good reason why I don't go. I'm legally responsible for the rent we owe there. You aren't. If I go and the Hardcastle harpy happens to be about she can dial 999 or call a passing policeman and generally create a stink and I should be in an awkward position. You aren't legally responsible for anything and she can't do anything to you. Which she knows perfectly well."

"Suppose she won't let me have the letter?"

"She would be acting highly illegally if she didn't let you have it; but in all probability that won't arise. At four o'clock she's in the basement making tea and the chances of her being in the hall are just about nil."

"My God, what a way of living."

"What do you mean?"

"We've got to sell books to live and then raid the places when we can't pay the rent, in order to get the money owing to us."

Arthur Engleton smiled. "Life is mostly lived by subterfuges," he said, "if you haven't realised that by now you ought to have done."

## CHAPTER II

AT A QUARTER to four Jean Engleton walked slowly down Denvers Street, spinning out the time and her progress by looking in the window of every shop that she passed.

There were not many shops since most of the property was still residential; hotels, private hotels, and boarding-houses jostling one another all the way down the street and interspersed here and there by a solicitor's office or the house of some obscure and unlikely publication.

The Venice, no shabbier, no more attractive than the rest of them, was almost half-way down on what at this time of day was the sunny side.

It stood near the corner of Cross Street which ran from Denvers Street towards Bloomsbury proper.

At the far end lay Denvers Square, a sizeable oasis of grass and large trees still well kept and a most welcome escape from the immediate dusty urgency of the traffic-filled street.

It was to Denvers Square that one or other, and frequently both, of the Miss Petersons went every afternoon for a walk before tea.

"Just my luck if they didn't go to-day," Jean told herself gloomily, but she didn't really believe that they wouldn't go; and, thinking over the whole plot, she had to admit that like many of Arthur's subterfuges—she was glad to borrow the word from him—it was neat and effective.

Arthur could always be clever in manœuvring his way out of difficulties; he just wasn't clever enough to avoid getting into them.

It was nearly four now and unmistakably coming down Denvers Street from the Square was one of the Miss



Petersons. They were both elderly, fat, perpetually short of breath, constantly emanating a terrifying belief in respectability, and a fear of anything modern.

"At least they've got enough to live on," she had once said to Arthur, discussing them.

"As long as they don't live," he had rejoined in one of the quick flashes which not infrequently came to him.

Jean was even mildly amused by the adventure she had let herself in for now. "I feel like a man waiting to rob a bank," she told herself; there was just enough spice in the incident, like raiding the prohibited red-currant bushes as a child, to put an edge on it.

She stepped in front of the elderly woman and said:

"Good afternoon."

"Why, Mrs. Engleton, I didn't see you about this morning."

"My husband and I went out early."

"I've been up to the square alone, my sister isn't very well."

Jean let the small-talk flow along, adding her quota to it when necessary. It was easy enough to follow Miss Peterson up the three shallow steps and to wait politely behind her whilst she fumbled for her key and opened the door.

As soon as she was in the hall, now paying no attention to the dissertation on her sister's health which Miss Peterson was still giving, Jean saw that Arthur had guessed right as he so often did in this sort of position.

There was a letter for him in the tape-covered baize-covered board in the hall. It must have come after they quietly decamped that morning; Bridgie the small, brisk maid of all work would put it up in the hall and Mrs. Hardcastle had not yet got round to taking it down.

Not only was there a letter for Arthur but, unexpectedly, one for herself.

Although she had an indisputable right to both these letters Jean felt a slight thrill of triumph as she reached

up, took them and, with a quick word to the still voluble Miss Peterson, turned back to the front door.

Her fingers told her that there was a slight bulkiness about Arthur's letter which seemed to show that his story about the enclosed fiver was probably true—something which could not always be said of his tales by any means. Whom her own letter was from she had no idea; she was content to stuff them both into her bag and to go.

"Going out again?" asked Miss Peterson who was obviously unaware that Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Engleton had only that morning flitted from the Venice taking all their possessions with them and owing five weeks' rent.

"I'm afraid so." Her only thought now was to get out and away before Mrs. Hardcastle came up from the basement.

She opened the door and found herself face to face with Mrs. Hardcastle who was standing on the top step, about to enter.

The landlady of the Venice was round-faced and piggy-eyed. She never forgot, and never allowed her tenants ("guests") to forget, the fact that her late husband had once been a captain (in the Army Pay Corps). She was capable of being very bad tempered and unpleasant and in this particular instance she had justification for being both.

Her small bead-like eyes burned brightly at the sight of someone she had never expected to see again.

"Well!" she said, "Mrs. Engleton."

"Good afternoon," Jean said. The sense of almost pleasurable excitement which had accompanied the adventure so far had evaporated now. Arthur, who had lived for long enough with the law on his tail as it were, might talk glibly about what could and could not happen to you, but she wasn't so sure.

"Is that all you've got to say?" Mrs. Hardcastle demanded.

"I just looked in to get a letter for my husband."

"You're taking nothing out of this house."

Jean essayed to go down the three steps but the landlady, moving sideways, barred her way.

"Mrs. Hardcastle, I want to go into the street, please."

"I don't doubt you do. And what about the money you owe me?"

"My husband will pay when he can."

"Is that why you ran away with all your things whilst I was out shopping?"

"My husband will pay when he can."

"He'll pay when I find out where he is. Fancy you having the cheek to come back here like this——"

"I just went inside for a letter."

"Well, you can just come inside again. With me. And I'll ring up the police and see what they have to say. Robbing people left and right like that."

Jean was frightened now. The word "police" was disquieting. She didn't know exactly what the law was about people who ran away from hotels without paying their debts and she didn't want to have to find out.

The one thing she mustn't do, she realised, was to let herself be talked back into the house. She hated the Venice suddenly, remembering its shabbiness, the awful pretence gentility of its brown papered dining-room, the fly-blown lampshades and the stained bath; and with it she hated a dozen other almost exactly similar places that made up the way of life which Arthur, with his ability that was never recognised and his plans that never came off, had let her in for.

"If you would please get out of my way——" she said.

"Get out of your way—well, I like that, I must say. Why, you're nothing but a common thief. That's what it is, common thieving to come into a respectable private hotel like this and run away without paying what you owe."

"My husband will pay when he can."

"I suppose he'll make a special point of bringing round

the money in person—that's why he sneaked out and ran away."

"When his book is published——"

"His book! Nobody will ever see that precious book of his any more than I shall see my money. What some women will put up with from men! Thank goodness Captain Hardcastle wasn't like that. I've been used to gentlemen who acted like gentlemen."

"Mrs. Hardcastle, if you would please let me move down the steps."

"Don't imagine you can just run away and nothing happen to you. There's such a thing as the law for people like you."

"Meanwhile, please step to one side and let me go."

"If there was a policeman coming down the road at this minute I'd call him and give you in charge."

"What for, Mrs. Hardcastle?"

"What for? Why, for the money you owe me, of course."

"I don't owe you any money."

"What! You owe me twenty-seven pounds at least."

"My husband may owe you something. I don't."

"Sheltering behind your husband now. Well, I never did. And all those empty bottles in the wardrobe. No wonder you couldn't pay any rent. Drunkards never can."

"That sounds like a highly defamatory thing to say."

The voice, a pleasant masculine voice, came from behind Jean and she turned round in surprise to find a man of twenty-six or -seven standing in the doorway.

"I hope you're not going to interfere, Mr. Thorpe," the landlady said as unpleasantly as she dared; but the fact that Mr. Thorpe who had only arrived on the previous evening was something to do with the law, plus the threatening sound of the word "defamatory," made her suddenly a little less sure of herself.

Mr. Thorpe smiled. "Not interfering in any way.

You're doing that, aren't you, Mrs. Hardcastle? This lady and I both want to go down the steps and into the street."

The incensed landlady stood irresolute.

"And I am sure you will have more sense than to try to stop us."

Mrs. Hardcastle moved reluctantly to one side and Jean ran down the steps.

"Don't think I won't get the money you owe me," the landlady called after her viciously. "Common thieving that's all it is, common thieving."

The one or two people who happened to be passing looked up with the bland indifference of the Londoner, but they took no further notice and in a minute Jean was fifty yards away and the incident over.

She felt unhappy and shaky inside . . . you got away with it, and nothing would come of it, and it was one with all the other shifts and dishonesties, the *subterfuges*, which made up the whole of her life and all round her London was full of people who went to Ascot, people who said "put it down on the bill," people who signed cheques and didn't have to wonder whether they would be met, people who said "have the car ready at four, will you" . . .

"The old hag was quite right about my interfering. I apologise."

She whipped round and there was Thorpe, overtaking her with long, quick strides and now falling in step beside her.

"I'm most frightfully grateful."

"She's scared of me because she knows I have something to do with the law. And The Law, capital T capital L, always scares people like her. Thank goodness. What's the trouble? Or perhaps you don't want to say?"

He pretended not to see the tears in her eyes; and she knew that he pretended not to.

"Or maybe a cup of tea would come in handy?"

"Very."



They had turned into Cross Street now and were passing a café—Ruffino's.

"In there?" he suggested.

She nodded, still unsure of her emotions and her ability to control them.

Ruffino's was furnished in contemporary (i.e. uncomfortable) style but it was almost empty, which pleased Jean.

They sat away from the window.

"She might have followed us and come in making a fuss."

"Very doubtful I should think, but we'll give the window a miss if you prefer."

When the girl came to wait on them, very dark and unmistakably Italian, he smiled at her and said:

"*Buon giorno. Com'e sta?*"

She flashed a smile at him hearing her own language well spoken and Jean, who wanted something ordinary to say, asked: "You've been here before, then?"

"No. Never. This is my first, well, second, day in this part of London. But I like trying to talk Italian. What shall we have? Tea and toast?"

"Just tea for me. Nothing to eat."

Thorpe ordered tea and toast for two "on spec" as he said. "You may find you want something. That Hardcastle creature is a bitch. I had a first-class row with her myself over dirty sheets. That's why I was glad to put a spoke in her wheel just now. Partly."

"She's quite right about me, us. Me and Arthur, that is."

"Arthur being your husband I take it?"

"Yes. We don't even know names, do we? How silly. I'm Jean Engleton. Mrs. Engleton."

"And I'm John Thorpe, barrister-at-law."

"That sounds very imposing."

"The trouble is that at the moment it's highly impecunious."

"No wonder you were sympathetic."

"I gather from what I couldn't help overhearing that Mrs. Hardcastle is under the impression you owe her some money?"

Jean waited whilst the tea and toast were put into position by the dark Italian girl. It gave her a chance to think. And what she thought was that pretence, trying to keep up a front, didn't really matter much anyway, and with this man whom she would almost certainly never see again didn't matter at all. And in any case she was sick to death of pretence and fronts.

"Yes. We do. Twenty-seven pounds. We've been five weeks living at that awful Venice place of hers and not paid for much. I suppose really when we went there we knew we shouldn't be able to keep up the rent. But we've got to live somewhere. Somehow. And there's always a chance that Arthur will get some work, or sell a script; or something."

"What's his job? Is he in films?"

"He's a writer. He *has* written film scripts; but you know what the film world is. Or perhaps you don't. Lucky you. And then he does articles and reviews and he's going to write a book."

"It might be a best seller."

"And in the meantime?"

He stared back at her across the table . . . the remark about the best seller had been silly he decided . . . she wasn't in the mood for facetious stuff . . . she was pretty well used up emotionally, this woman facing him.

"As you say," he repeated slowly, "in the meantime——"

"What would you do?"

He didn't know what he would do. He was twenty-six. His parents still had a modest but comfortable house in Essex. His father allowed him four hundred a year. True. He had hardly begun to make his own way yet, but . . .

if you *were* alone, he asked himself, no job; no parents behind you; no allowance; no money; what *would* you do?

"This Arthur of yours," he asked, "he can't get a job, I mean a steady permanent job of any sort?"

The woman made a gesture. "Of any sort? Of *what* sort? He isn't qualified. Even if he got into some kind of office he couldn't, at any rate he wouldn't, stick it." She shrugged her shoulders. "People are as they are; not as the copybooks say they ought to be. That's life."

"And you?"

"What is this, a means test or something?"

Thorpe flushed. "I'm sorry——"

"So am I. My nerves are a bit raggy. Dodging everybody all the time because you know you are not going to pay them makes you raggy."

"Look, take things easy——"

"It's quite all right. I'm crying. All right, I'm crying. Or is it a sin to show emotion as well as not to have any money? It was a perfectly fair question of yours. Yes, I've done jobs. All sorts of jobs. Helped in hat shops; helped in a dog parlour; even cooked in a canteen. If I hadn't we'd have been even worse off than we are. But when I've been away working like that Arthur has got himself into more trouble than usual. And he doesn't like it anyway. He's always glad of the money, of course; he's always glad of any money; but he doesn't like my being away working——" half-way between tears and laughter she decided to laugh. "Silly, isn't it?" she said, "but I told you, that's how it is; that's life; people live that way, if you can call it living, and it's no good saying they don't."

"You——" Thorpe started to say something and then thought better of it. He judged this woman to be four, five? years older than he was, and a great deal older than that in experience. She was in tears and hard beset.

He felt out of his depth. This was something different from parties on the lawn and tennis at the vicarage.

"More tea?" he asked.

Jean held out her cup, watched him fill it and said: "I wonder what you were going to ask me."

"I haven't the right to ask you anything."

"You were going to ask me why I don't leave Arthur, why I stick to him."

"It's none of my business."

"It was none of your business on the steps of the Venice, but I'm very grateful to you for making it so."

He smiled. "I was quite sure that in any dispute it would be right to side against Mrs. Hardcastle."

Jean sipped her second cup of tea whilst she looked at him.

"The reason I don't leave Arthur," she said suddenly, "is because I——" she was going to use the word "can't" but shrank from saying anything quite so final. "Ah, it's difficult to explain, maybe you'll find out for yourself some day. It's not exactly that I'm afraid of him. Of course, I'm not afraid. But it's like I said, life. You get tangled up with people, with a person"—she intertwined her fingers—"the strands get knitted together, you come to a sort of want-hate-need position that just can't be shrugged off. Half the time a drug addict wants to stop taking the stuff; half the time he's on his knees praying for it. I keep thinking, hoping that Arthur will make good——"

"I'm sure he will."

Well, there it was, the conventional phrase. The return to accepted normality and decency in the conversation. She welcomed it. She knew better than most that the only possible formula for living is pretence. You have to pretend. She thanked him for his help, for the tea. She told him "Don't get caught up with people you can't escape from" and she went out. Along Cross Street, doubling on her tracks up Canvey Place just in

case Mrs. Hardcastle was following, but of course she wasn't likely to be and wasn't, and so back to the Belmont Private Hotel in Slade Street.

Mrs. Norris was in the hall. A landlady not as yet disillusioned, Jean remembered. It was essential to keep her thus as long as possible.

She forced herself to smile agreeably, woman to woman stuff.

"Is Mr. Engleton in?" she inquired.

"He's upstairs."

Arthur was lying on the bed reading, in his shirt sleeves. He looked up anxiously when Jean came in but was careful not to speak until the door was shut.

"Any luck?"

She nodded.

"Any trouble?"

"Not really. Mrs. Hardcastle was coming in just as I was going out——"

"Where had she been at that time of day?"

"She had been *somewhere* Arthur. The point is we ran into one another."

"I suppose she played up?"

"She was unpleasant which isn't difficult for her, of course; and anyway in this instance I can't say I blame her."

"But you got the letter?"

Jean opened her bag and drew out the two letters that had been waiting in the hall of the Venice.

Her husband was so anxious to get his that he hardly noticed that she also had one; but a couple of minutes later when she had been reading the typewritten pages carefully and slowly and then lowered them saying "What an extraordinary thing" he looked up, responding to an excitement in her voice, and asked: "What's that? What's extraordinary?"



### CHAPTER III

"YOU SAY you didn't know this aunt of yours, Mrs. Herbie-Jerbie or whatever she was called?" There was no whisky left in the bottle now and Arthur was in the most jovial of moods.

"Hely-Baker. Yes, of course, I knew her. Years ago. But I haven't seen or heard of her except once since I was eighteen."

"And God knows that wasn't yesterday."

"It wasn't. But you needn't rub it in. I'm thirteen years younger than you anyway."

Arthur Engleton flushed for a moment; he didn't like to be reminded that he was forty-three, and a bad forty-three at that. For a moment he nearly lost his temper but he reflected that Jean with the sort of letter she now had resting on her lap was not the kind of person one wanted to lose one's temper with.

"And what happened then when you were eighteen?"

"Aunt Au as we always called her was living in the country. Not *this* place, *this* house; I've never heard of that till to-day. Somewhere in Hertfordshire. It was only three years after the war and things were still pretty difficult. Especially where she was, out in the wilds. She got 'flu and had absolutely nobody to look after her or do anything so Mummy asked me if I'd go down and give a hand. I didn't want to one bit, but I said I would and actually I stayed there about a fortnight. Maybe a little longer."

"And you haven't seen her since?"

"Only once. When you did."

"I did?"

"If you remember you and I were married. In a

church. And there were a lot of guests there. Aunt Au was among them."

"Good God, I can't be expected to remember all your family who turned up at the wedding."

"No. Well, they haven't worried you much since, have they?"

"Only because they thoroughly disapproved of your having married me."

"You've not done much to make it easier."

"Why should I try to ingratiate myself with a crowd of morons?"

"I wouldn't describe Aunt Au as a moron——"

Arthur made himself laugh. It was difficult to remember that he wouldn't now be able to enjoy the pleasure of being disagreeable to his wife whenever he felt in a bad temper. It was against all his principles and instincts to quarrel with an heiress.

"No more would I. Good luck to the old girl wherever she is. In Abraham's bosom or anywhere else." He reached across and took the incredible letter from Jean's lap.

It was from a firm of solicitors, Mason Siward & Mason, in Old Broad Street and, as is customary with solicitors' letters (whatever popular legend may say), it was concise and to the point. It was also admirably easy to understand. The gist of it was that Mrs. Audrey Muriel Hely-Baker had recently died; her will had been proved and her estate was now being dealt with. Among the bequests in her will was one leaving to her niece, now Jean Marianne Engleton, first the sum of one thousand pounds free of succession duty and, second, the freehold property known as Platts, situated in Marsh Road, Witherley in the County of Essex.

It was understood that the property had not been lived in for some time and the keys were in the hands of Bayley and Foster, House Agents, Witherley. If Mrs. Engleton could make it convenient to call at Mason Siward &

Mason's office in the near future to establish her identity with them they could then proceed in the matter and give her a letter of introduction to the house agents in Witherley. . . .

"And you hadn't any idea at all that this was going to happen?"

"No. Of course not. I've said so. Since I married I've hardly seen anything of the family and I had almost forgotten that Aunt Au existed."

"And this house?"

Jean shook her head. "I've never even heard of Witherley."

"I wonder what sort of place it is—the house, I mean."

"A bungalow with a tin roof probably."

"I don't see why it should be—and a thousand quid. You must have looked after the old girl to some tune."

"I don't think I did anything out of the way. But I did get on with her. I remember that." Jean shrugged her shoulders. "Things happen like that in life, sometimes."

Arthur nodded slowly. "Yes. Miracles sometimes happen."

It had all the appearance of a miracle to him. Looking back over the last seven or eight years he couldn't now remember the time when—as to-day—a five-pound note hadn't seemed the ultimate possibility of immediate wealth, or when the problem of living had not been so much finding somewhere to go to as finding some method of sneaking out from where they were, leaving debts and disaster behind.

Jean reached for the letter, folded, it and was putting it in her bag.

"Hadn't I better keep it?" he suggested.

"I don't see why I shouldn't."

"You'll lose it and we shan't know where to go or the telephone number or anything."

She laughed, and after a moment's hesitation, surrendered the letter, watching whilst he put it in his pocket.

Suddenly she stretched across and put her hand on his, the intimacy of the gesture was now an infrequent thing between them and the man didn't let his eyes meet hers.

"Arthur, you said a moment ago that miracles happen. Something like that. And this is a miracle."

"A thousand pounds is always a miracle."

"But I mean something more than that. Arthur, this is the chance we never thought we would get. At least, I never did——"

"You've never had very much faith in me have you?"

"You can't say that. You can't. You can't say I haven't stuck by you."

"'Never had much faith in me' was what I said."

"Arthur, it's nine years——"

"Don't keep reminding me how old I'm getting. Have you ever really believed in me during these nine years?"

"You ought not to ask. But——"

"There's always a 'but' isn't there?"

Jean spread out a hand. "Look, what's the point of quarrelling now, when we are getting a chance?"

"I don't want to quarrel. I want to know what your 'but' was."

"There isn't any 'but.'"

"Why say it then?"

"You can't go on believing in something that doesn't come. You start off believing, but if nothing happens how can you go on? At least, you do go on, but it isn't the same, is it? It can't be."

"I suppose not."

"I'm only saying, Arthur, that the last few years have used me up. This business of scrape and—your word—subterfuge all the time. This afternoon running into Mrs. Hardcastle on the steps——"

"That bitch."

"All right, that bitch. But I've got tired of having to run away from bitches and lie to them and pretend——"

"Why should you—now?"

"That's what I started saying: this is our chance."

"If I could have six months, settled in a house in the country I could get down to writing my book."

"Of course you could."

"No more bloody reviews for P.V. at two guineas a time. Two guineas for a six-hundred-word intelligent assessment of a book."

"You can produce your own book, if . . ."

"If what?"

"Arthur, you've got to give yourself a chance."

"What does that mean?"

She made a faint gesture towards the now empty glass at her side.

"*That.*"

She was scared as she said it. Only the exceptional circumstances of the day made her brave enough to say it. She knew by bitter experience that you couldn't argue with this man or criticise him. He wouldn't take it.

And she saw now the flush begin to mark his usually rather pale face and the cruel look come into his eyes.

But if he was going to say anything savage he bit it back.

"I agree," he said. "It's our chance. Let's take it."

"You mean that?"

"Of course I mean it. Do you think I enjoy running away without paying and all the rest of it?"

"I'll ring up the lawyers to-morrow morning and make an appointment. Will you come with me?"

"Naturally. What's the time?"

"Nearly six."

"Let's go round to the Roebuck and celebrate," he caught the look on her face and went on explosively: "For God's sake Jean, you don't expect me to become a teetotaller do you? If we can't have a drink the night we come into a thousand quid and a house when can we?"

She laughed. "All right, Arthur."



Hours later she lay awake looking at the light of the street lamp reflected on the wall and ceiling and thinking. Arthur Engleton lay beside her asleep and snoring slightly. He was not very drunk. But then Arthur never did get very drunk. The session in the Roebuck had been a long one and in the course of it he had drunk a lot of whisky. He had also talked a lot about the sort of house he expected Platts to be and of the sort of life they would live there. At one period in the evening he saw himself, a completely ruralised character, superintending the running of a highly profitable fruit, pigs and poultry concern all expertly organised and in full production.

Jean, to whom the pipe dream was not a new one, hadn't laughed. There was something about Arthur which precluded your laughing at him. His eyes, possibly; the queer blank look in those brown eyes which, it was easy to persuade yourself, saw, and occasionally foresaw, a strange destiny for himself and were intent on following it.

Jean Engleton stared at the lamplight and splashed ceiling; and outside the occasional midnight traffic of the street went noisily by. She owned a thousand pounds and a house . . . it was an idea that she could not get used to . . . she wished that they had not gone to the Roebuck; she wished—but she knew that there was no good in wishing.

Life was as life was; if she had learnt nothing else she had learnt that.

One thousand pounds and a house. . . .

They were welcomed at Bayley and Foster's by a bright, middle-aged managing clerk who cocked an interested eye at them as soon as he heard that they had come about the Marsh Road property.

The house, it appeared, had been empty for some time; Mrs. Hely-Baker had not exactly said that she wouldn't

sell it, but she had never given precise instructions to offer it for sale, and in any case——

“In any case what?” Jean asked.

The managing clerk smiled at her reassuringly. “You’ve got a well-built piece of property there, Madam, make no mistake about that; but it is just a shade old-fashioned perhaps in these days and of course it is a little out of the way.”

“When shall we be able to take possession?”

The clerk bent down, opened a drawer and from a mass of labelled keys selected one.

“Now, Madam. Here is the front door key. I understand the keys to the back door and the sheds are hanging up in the house itself. All we have been doing here is to keep an eye on the property for Mrs. Hely-Baker. Once we hand the key over to you and get a receipt for it we have finished and the property is yours.”

Jean turned the key over in her hand.

“Platts. Marsh Road. Front Door,” was written on the label in faded ink. It was an odd moment of triumph and excitement to be holding in her hands the key of her own house.

“Shall I take charge of it?” Arthur suggested.

She looked up quickly and hesitated.

“Rather big for your bag, isn’t it?”

“Perhaps it is.” She held it out and let him slip it into his pocket.

“I don’t know if you’ve ever been to the house——” the managing clerk said.

“No, never.”

“Ah, then you won’t know about the lift.”

“Lift?”

“The owner previous to Mrs. Hely-Baker was something of a cripple and had a lift installed to save going up stairs. But of course you don’t have to use it if you don’t want to.”

“Rather fun.”

"Ah, here's young Mr. Foster."

Jean turned and saw a young man, bareheaded and fresh looking, coming into the room. Twenty or thereabouts she judged him to be. He was on the short side and broad-shouldered; he had the freshness of youth about him and a shaft of sunlight coming through the grimy window of the office fell on him.

He smiled at her.

The managing clerk explained who they were. "... and I've just handed the key of the house over to Mrs. Engleton."

"I expect you'll be wanting to go out there straight away," young Richard Foster said. "Have you got a car here?"

"We left it in London," Arthur said quickly. Jean was used to this defence mechanism of lying; Arthur had made her used to it; if you talked big right at the outset it was wonderful what people would let you get away with, for a time. She was used to it; but she never liked it, and certainly never liked it less than on this particular instance.

"I'll run you out there," Richard Foster said. "I've got my car outside."

"That's too much trouble——" Jean began, but he laughed her aside and said in his cheerful way:

"Not a bit. It won't take many minutes. It's rather a poor bus service but later on when you get your own car down here you'll be all right."

A Morris 1000 stood outside.

"Handy little job," young Foster was saying. "Just suits me. I have to do an awful lot of dashing about. Mostly short journeys in a hurry. Perhaps you'd like to sit in the back, sir, with Mrs. Engleton."

On the way he chatted cheerfully about the house. "... not the sort of thing a house agent normally does. Especially these days. We weren't trying to sell the house; we weren't collecting any rent for it. Just looking after it.

Somebody, actually it's usually been me, has gone there once a week to look round the place, open the windows for half an hour and generally keep an eye on it. I'm afraid the garden has got into a pretty bad way. We have had a man in a couple of times to try and tidy up a bit, but you know how things get out of hand."

"What sort of house is it?" Jean asked.

"Well, it's Victorian. I can't honestly say I think it's beautiful but it's jolly well built, of course. Jolly solid."

"Has it been unoccupied for long?"

"Quite a bit."

"I can't understand why it hasn't been sold."

"Mrs. Hely-Baker did contemplate it, I think; but she never actually gave instructions about it; and in any case——"

Young Foster's remarks died away as he dealt with the problems of a changing traffic light and undecided pedestrians. "The town's always like this now," he said, "it'll be better in a minute or two when we get out a bit."

"It says something about furniture in the lawyer's letter," Jean said, "is there actually any in the house?"

"Lord, yes. Stacked with it. It's a completely furnished house. Of course——"

"Of course, what?"

Young Foster laughed. "The furniture's a bit on the heavy side, but that's in keeping with the period of the house, isn't it?"

"We shall be having our own stuff down as soon as we settle in," Arthur said. "It's all stored at the moment."

"Quite."

Jean was suddenly furious with her husband. They didn't own a stick of furniture. Their "own stuff" i.e. their total worldly possessions, could be, and would have to be, packed into three old and bulging suitcases. She didn't want to start a new life with the lies and pretences, the subterfuges, of the old days.

"I expect we shall be perfectly happy with what furniture there is in the house," she said.

Her husband laughed.

"After all we haven't so much of our own to bring down," she added. It was as much as she dared to say. She wanted to say "after all, we haven't a stick of our own and you ought to know it, seeing that what we had has all been sold to pay for your whisky and idleness." She wanted to say "for God's sake now, with this heaven-sent chance out of the blue, let's start straight. Let's mean what we say and forget all about the lies we had to tell to impress people."

And because her husband knew exactly that that was what was in her mind and because he didn't intend to let her indulge in any fancy notions of criticising him or running counter to his scheme of things he said:

"I don't quite know what you mean by that."

"Arthur, for God's sake——"

"What on earth is the matter with you, Jean? "

"You know perfectly well what's the matter——"

Young Foster, sitting in front in the driving seat, listened (he couldn't help it) and wondered.

Something had blown up out of somewhere. A squall out of the blue sky. Something he couldn't quite put his hand on. About the furniture, presumably. Nothing to do with him; but there was a note in the man's voice that he didn't like. Didn't like at all. In fact he hadn't taken to the man right from the start. Something—difficult to say what the objectionable something about him was exactly; but how the heck did a woman like *that* get tied up with him.

"This is the beginning of Marsh Road now," he said aloud so as to stop the man in the back seat from saying anything more in that unpleasant voice of his.

Witherley hadn't suffered (or benefited) a great deal, at least on this side of it, from modernisation. It was still, in essence, one of those Essex towns that secretly



keep very much to themselves. There was the core of it, the main street, the shops, the chapel, all huddled together in the centre; then a very small fringe of residential houses; the lawyer, the doctor, the bigger shopkeepers, still lived in them; then, quite abruptly and suddenly, the flat Essex countryside. The pavement ended, the last ugly lamp-post stood sentinel and immediately the country began.

With the exception of Marsh Road.

There are always marshes in Essex; dank, dreary god-forgotten places off which the east winds blow biting cold. Eerie places. You come on them suddenly and unexpectedly. Witherley had a marsh tract to the east of it. No Witherley man in his senses ever went into the marshes if he could avoid it but there was a road which led to them and along that road, a mile and half out of town proper and well before you got to the beginnings of Witherley Marsh itself, someone in Victorian days had built a house.

You couldn't see it from the road because of a dozen tall fir trees that stood round it, a sombre shelter against the east winds.

But there the name was, and Jean read it, the letters a little moss-grown but still decipherable on one of the brick pillars at the end of the drive. The pillar stood just slightly askew.

*Platts.*

"Platts," Jean read silently, "*and it's mine.*" The moment had an undeniable thrill; she wished now that she hadn't given way to Arthur and that she still had the key in her hand so that she might press it between finger and thumb and be confirmed and reassured by the physical fact of it.

"I did warn you about the garden," young Foster said almost apologetically; but actually the garden wasn't too bad. The gravel drive had a lot of weeds in it; the grass was rank and needed cutting; everything

was certainly neglected and overgrown, but it might have been worse. It might all have been a jungle; but it wasn't a jungle. It was a garden dominated by a house. A motionless, quiet garden shut in by tall, dark trees and dominated by the house.

The house looked solid; the curtains at all the windows were drawn, save one. Jean, looking at everything with avid eyes, noticed that detail at once.

As though she had said something to him, but she hadn't, young Foster said, "We keep the curtains drawn so as to prevent things from fading in the sunlight."

They were standing by the car in front of the house now.

"It won't really take all that much work to get the garden back into shape," Richard Foster said.

Jean turned to him with a quick, grateful smile.

"Just what I was thinking," she said. "No; it won't." A minor revolution was boiling up inside her and she had to force herself to face it. But face it she had to. She knew that. Somehow this moment and this place were of immense importance to her.

She turned to her husband and said as brightly and lightly as she could utter such vital words:

"Can I have the key, Arthur? I'd like to open the front door myself."

Richard Foster continued to look out over the garden with a deliberately preoccupied air. He heard. And approved. It was her house, after all; he had seen the correspondence about it from the lawyers. If she wanted to open it herself why the heck shouldn't she? Just for a moment he was afraid that her surly brute of a husband was going to be awkward and that there would be a scene—"hope they appeal to me"—he thought.

But Arthur didn't turn awkward; merely sarcastic.

"Who am I?" he wanted to know, "to interfere with you doing what you like with your own property? I

dare say I'll come in useful for carrying coal or something; meanwhile, lead the way in."

"Jolly good," thought young Foster, "and a fat lot of coal-carrying *you'll* do."

"Must be quite an occasion going into your own house for the first time like this," he said aloud.

Jean gave him a quick smile. It sounded as though he understood and it was nice to be understood.

She unlocked the door and it seemed to her that it swung open easily, welcomingly, almost of its own account.

A waft of cold air came to her.

"It smells dank," she said uncertainly.

"It's because the place has been unoccupied; we do our best to air it every week, but you're bound to get a certain amount of dampness I'm afraid."

"Y-yes. I suppose so."

The hall was dark but not unimpressive. A wide and unexpectedly good staircase led up out of it.

*Platts*, thought Jean, now inside and looking round.

"What on earth is that arm-chair doing in the middle of the hall?" she asked.

A heavy, comfortable-looking, old-fashioned arm-chair stood quite alone in the very middle of the hall.

Richard Foster laughed. This was an awkward moment for him. *Caveat emptor*, he thought, and all that. Let the buyer find out the snags for himself. Only, of course, in this case there wasn't an *emptor*; this attractive young woman wasn't buying it. He needn't be afraid of queering a sale or a let . . . still, nothing to do with him; and after all what did he believe, or not believe, of such things? Quite honestly he didn't know. . . .

"Must have got left there by mistake," he said.

It wasn't a mistake that mattered to Jean.

"Is that the drawing-room?" she asked, pointing.

"Yes, through there."

There were two windows in the drawing-room and at

one of them the curtains had been drawn back so that the room was half lit.

The furniture was heavy but impressive and the room well proportioned.

Jean turned quickly thinking that Arthur had touched her with his hand; but both men were some little distance from her.

Young Richard Foster met her eye. He smiled at her. "He's young," she thought, "and a most attractive boy."

"I do hope you'll be happy here in Platts, Mrs. Engleton," he said.

"Thank you so much," Jean answered, smiling back, "I'm sure I shall."

## CHAPTER IV

TWO MONTHS LATER Jean was alone in the house. Arthur had gone up to London for the day to see his publishers, and—Jean guessed—to get away from the boredom of the country.

As far as she could tell, the plans about his book were materialising at last. She was so used to "certainties" that went astray and to "definite arrangements" which somehow vanished into thin air that even now she was chary of being too optimistic, but at least he was working regularly and seemed to have a certain amount of ready cash. He seldom volunteered information about his income; usually if he mentioned money to her it was to grumble at the lack of it and to borrow some if possible.

She did not mind his being away for the day in the slightest; she welcomed it. She liked to have the house to herself. From the very first moment of entering it she had felt an affinity with Platts. It had a personality and it was a personality that she liked. It had also, she was

convinced, secrets and they were secrets that she was beginning to understand.

She was walking now from her bedroom along the corridor towards the end of the stairs; she passed the gates of the lift shaft on the left but this did not interest her. The lift was out of order anyway and as neither she nor Arthur wanted to use it they did not propose to spend money on making it work again.

It was not the lift shaft that Jean was thinking about, but something different. As she approached the end of the corridor she deliberately slowed down. She was making an experiment and she did not wish to hurry it. She was not afraid, but she knew that slight feeling of excited apprehension which must stir any human being who is aware that a corner of the curtain is being lifted.

She knew that it was within quite a small space, just at the top of the stairs, that the thing would happen.

She walked very slowly now, her eyes wide open, but knowing quite well that she would see nothing. It was not through her eyes but through the very pores of her skin that she would be aware of this thing.

She stopped abruptly in mid-stride, making a note, for interest, of her exact position in the corridor. There was a slight tear in the paper which served as a fixing mark.

Then she lifted her face up slightly and closed her eyes.

The air on her cheeks was suddenly colder. Just as certainly as if she had moved a hand from warm sunshine into cool water so she was aware now of a difference in temperature.

Yet she knew that it was not so much a difference in the temperature of the normal atmosphere as a door being opened and a cool wind blowing in from somewhere else.

The uneasy sense of being touched by another world for a moment was overpoweringly strong.

But she was not afraid. Speaking slowly and aloud she



said: "*If there is any unquiet spirit in this house may God give it rest and happiness.*"

Instantly the air around her was full of friendliness, with some faculty inside her which was more essential than the evidence of eye, or ear or nose, with something right in the middle of her which was pure *knowing* she was aware, was well assured, that whoever it was who still lingered in the house was well disposed towards her.

She stood there for a few moments. The coldness had gone now; the air immediately around her was the same as the air anywhere else. She told herself "this is what people mean when they talk about a ghost, about a haunted house. I always thought I should be frightened of anything like that. But I am not. What I feel isn't fear."

She went on down the stairs and saw, to her amusement, the heavy arm-chair in the middle of the hall again.

It had not been there twenty minutes ago when she had gone upstairs and there was nobody in the house but herself.

"You shouldn't do that," she said aloud, "it's a nuisance for me to put back."

Then suddenly, and for a moment only, she was scared.

She had thought herself so completely alone that the ringing of the front-door bell made her jump.

It took her a moment to remember that it would be the normal human world ringing the front-door bell and that it was silly, if she wasn't frightened by the other thing, to be nervous of this.

She crossed to the door and opened it, reflecting that there might still be cause for legitimate alarm. Marsh Road was a lonely and unfrequented place; she was alone in the house; a gipsy pretending to be hawking wares, or a tramp, might be very awkward to deal with.

It was neither gipsy nor tramp on the doorstep, but young Richard Foster smiling at her as he stood there bare-headed in the afternoon sun.

She smiled back.

"Mrs. Engleton, I hope you don't mind my calling——"

"Of course I don't——"

"I happened to be passing on my way back from Witherley Marsh, we've got some property there for sale, and I thought I'd just see how you were settling in."

"That's very nice of you. Come in and have a cup of tea."

"Perhaps it isn't convenient for your husband and yourself——"

"Actually Arthur is up in London for the day so I'm all alone."

"Oh, in that case——"

Jean laughed aloud at his obvious boyish embarrassment.

"You are a silly boy," she said. "Why, I'm old enough to be your mother. Do come in and have tea with me. I won't be a jiffy making it and it will be much better fun than having it all by myself."

In the hall she said: "Would you mind helping me back with this arm-chair into the drawing-room——?"

Young Foster flushed at the sight of the chair standing incongruously in the middle of the hall: "If you remember," Jean added slightly maliciously, "it was here when you first brought us to the house."

"Yes, I remember."

They moved it back together and when it was in its proper position by the side of the fireplace, Jean said:

"You knew that there was something—well, *something* about the house right from the beginning, didn't you?"

Richard looked at her for a moment before replying. A man is not always bound to confess to what he knows or doesn't know; but it would have been unthinkable to tell a direct lie to her. Every boy of nineteen meets a woman of thirty who for a longer or shorter period

bowls him over. Who looks to him like Helen of Troy. Who makes him want to write poetry and to prove himself a man. Who makes him think the world well lost for love. Sooner or later he will get over it, but whilst it lasts it is potent, heady stuff.

"In a way I did. That is I'd heard rumours. People said odd things happened at Platts. Poltergeists and ghosts and so on. Quite honestly I didn't know whether to believe it or not. In fact, I *don't* really believe in things like that in a general way. Only once or twice when I've been coming here to keep an eye on the place I did notice things I couldn't very well account for."

"The chair in the hall?"

"Yes. That. I mean when you've been through a house opening windows and generally having a look round you can't swear, I agree, to the exact position in which you've left everything, but you can be sure that you didn't leave one of the drawing-room arm-chairs bang in the middle of the hall."

"What else?"

"The thing you spotted when I brought you up the drive that day. I said something about keeping all the curtains drawn and you saw that one wasn't. But I know that it *had* been drawn when I locked the house up and left it a week before."

Jean laughed. "Yes. That curtain is just a nuisance. I never bother to draw it now so I don't have any trouble with it."

"Mrs. Engleton, I'm frightfully glad you've brought this up. I felt wretched about it. I didn't know whether I ought to tell you or not. In a way it seemed mean not to; on the other hand it was your own property and I didn't exactly *know* anything——"

Jean smiled at him. "Not to worry. Actually, I think you did perfectly right. If you had told me anything before I came to look at the place I would probably have been put off it for good. And now I love it."

"You're not worried by anything here at all?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Is there anything here?"

"The arm-chair turns up in the middle of the hall. But why should that worry me? Especially if somebody's here to help me carry it back again."

They both laughed.

"I should absolutely hate to have done anything to mislead you in any way," young Richard Foster said, unduly emphasising the "you."

Jean thought, if I were sensible this is where I would be bright and brisk and tell him not to start thinking like that and to go away and get his tea in a café, and make eyes at the pretty waitress aged eighteen. But you're not always sensible, she thought. It was warming to hear open admiration in a man's voice; and of course that business about old enough to be his mother was sheer nonsense; I shall only be thirty next birthday . . . only! but I'm not thirty yet, not quite; twenty-nine, and if he's twenty we are actually in the same decade. . . .

"I'll get tea," she said. "Help yourself to a cigarette."

"Thanks frightfully, Mrs. Engleton."

She smiled at him . . . "Thanks frightfully," she liked the sound of the schoolboy phrase.

"I promise you it's a pleasure, Mr. Foster," she said seriously, teasing him.

"C-couldn't it be 'Richard'?"

"Richard Foster—is that your name?"

"Yes. They all call me Dick, in the office and at the tennis club and so on; but actually, well—I mean if it's anyone I—I mind about I'd sooner be called Richard."

"All right, Richard; it's an attractive name anyway. But only on one condition——"

"What's that?"

"That you call me 'Jean.'"

She expected that he would show some embarrassed

reluctance about this and was amused and interested that he didn't.

"I knew that was your name from the correspondence," he said. "It would be marvellous if I can call you by it."

When they were having tea he suddenly said: "Jean, it wasn't true what you said when you opened the door to me, was it?"

"When I opened the door to you? What was it? Something about the chair?"

"No. Not that. About—well about how old you are." He laughed to show how preposterous he thought the words were. "You said you were old enough to be my mother."

"Maybe I am."

"You couldn't possibly be."

"How old do you think I am?"

. . . dammit she thought what a fool question. No woman ever ought to ask a man that, unless it's her doctor or unless, unless . . . and suppose he says something devastatingly frank, he might say "you're thirty-seven" surely. Even nine years of subterfuges with Arthur hadn't done that to her face surely . . .

"I think that you are nearly thirty," he said, "and I'm very nearly twenty so really we are the same decade aren't we?"

The closeness of his words to her own thoughts quite shook Jean.

"Richard, you're a sweet boy."

"I expect you'll be frightfully happy here now that you've settled in," he said.

Jean thought for a few seconds and then answered slowly: "Yes, I really believe I will be happy."

"Funny, how you said that."

"How 'funny' Richard?"

"You sounded so uncertain, as though you didn't really expect happiness somehow."

"Richard, there may be only ten years between us



but a lot can happen in ten years; you can live a lot in ten years."

He looked closely at her. "You mean that a lot has happened to make you unhappy? To make you doubt happiness?"

Jean laughed, brisk and bright enough this time and got up.

"I mean that you must finish your tea and be off," she said. "You ought to be back at the office I'm sure, and I've got plenty to do here."

## CHAPTER V

ARTHUR HAD a lucky spell for his freelance writing shortly after they moved into Platts. P. V. Jansen, the literary editor of *The Weekly Critic*, asked him to review three considerable books and then a bunch of four lesser novels together; and in addition the *Onlooker* took a couple of articles.

This was all work which was paid for if not well at least promptly and as a result of his unusual state of comparative affluence Arthur was up in London a good deal—"making useful contacts," according to his account of it.

Jean found that she did not mind being left alone in the slightest. She liked Platts so much that by now the house was almost as good as a friend to talk to. She never passed the spot at the top of the stairs without pausing for a moment and uttering her prayer, "If there is any unquiet spirit in this house may God give it rest and happiness," and when she had said these words she was certain each time that they had been heard, understood and approved of.

Sometimes she would actually laugh aloud when she thought of the situation. She had never before had any

experience of a haunt, and in fact, until going to Platts, had she been asked the vague general question "Do you believe in ghosts?" she would have given a very cautious and sceptical answer, the substance of which, even if she hadn't expressed it in exact words, would have been that other people might possibly have had weird experiences that they couldn't account for, but that if such things had happened to her, plain, sensible, matter-of-fact Jean Engleton, she would have found some practical and common-sense explanation for them.

Now she was living in a house that quite definitely had a haunt and her sensations were all entirely unexpected. For one thing she was not afraid. The "feel" that she got from whatever influence it was lodged in the house was predominantly one of friendliness. She knew that there was no hostility to her; that she had been received and at the very least tolerated.

The poltergeist manifestations had practically ceased; it was a rare thing now for the arm-chair to be moved into the hall, on the other hand she had learnt that it was no good leaving the curtains drawn across the far window of the drawing-room all night. If she did so they would inevitably be pulled back in the morning.

Her romantic explanation of this was that the spirit still lingering in Platts had been longing for someone (a lover? a husband? a son?) to come back to the house and, day after day, maybe night after night, had sat at that particular window looking out, waiting in hope and longing.

So far as possible Jean never drew these particular curtains and she always made a point, if they had been drawn across during the evening, of pulling them back before going up to bed.

Whilst Arthur was up in London during the day making his contacts she busied herself getting the place straight and tidy, and already the garden was looking a great deal better.

Some three weeks after Richard Foster had come to tea she was sitting alone in the drawing-room listening to the wireless.

They could not afford television but had recently bought a good second-hand radio set which she used a great deal.

It was obvious that the introduction of wireless into Platts was not viewed entirely favourably as it was quite a common occurrence for the plug to be pulled out of its wall socket during the night, making it impossible to switch on next day until the plug had been put in again.

This was a nuisance, but it amused Jean more than anything else; and she was determined that whoever was still lingering at Platts would just have to get used to the idea of this newfangled thing being brought into the place.

If Arthur came back on the train he had said he was going to catch he would be arriving at any minute and, sure enough, within a few seconds of the seven o'clock signal she heard the front door open and a moment later he came into the room.

She could tell at once that he had been drinking and her heart failed her. He was not hopelessly drunk or anything like it; in fact, to anyone who didn't know him well there would seem very little amiss; but Jean did know him well. She knew that he had been engaged in a long, steady bout of drinking, and could almost name the company he had been keeping and guess the round of London pubs they had visited.

She knew from bitter experience that this was always the way of it; as soon as editors began to take his work and to notice him, the money that came in would be spent like this, with the result that book reviews were sent in late and articles which had been talked over and promised never got written.

She switched off the wireless and smiled at him. A man

has the right to be welcomed home, she thought; and she desperately wanted Platts to be a home for her and Arthur.

"Busy day?" she asked.

"Very. Seeing people. Making contacts. You know the normal sort of thing."

"Any luck?"

"You mean how much money have I made, don't you?"

Jean flushed at the deliberate unkindness in his voice but she kept her temper. She said: "I didn't put it quite like that, Arthur."

"But that's what you meant, wasn't it?"

"Not entirely. No."

"I don't know why it shouldn't be. I don't know of anything more important in the world than money."

"All right, then. Did you make any money?"

"As it happens I did. I went and saw Vincent Andrews of Andrews and Hoyle. He likes the idea I put up to him for a book and he wants me to go ahead with it."

"Oh, good."

"You haven't asked if he's paying any advance."

"Is he?"

"Two hundred pounds."

"Two hundred pounds!"

"Well, he isn't actually paying that down now. You know what publishers are. I've promised to write the first four or five chapters, say twenty thousand words, and let him see them. If he likes it he'll pay a hundred quid then and a further hundred when the book's published. If he doesn't like the first chapters he'll pay me fifty quid, anyway. Well, forty, actually. I got him to advance me a tenner this morning. It came in quite handy for making contacts and entertaining people during the day."

She knew he had said that deliberately so as to provoke

her into some comment. But she said nothing; and whether that was wise or unwise she wasn't sure.

"As no doubt you have observed," he added.

"Arthur, what good news about the book!"

"Yes." He stopped trying to provoke her. His writing meant a great deal to this man, this book in particular.

"You'll be able to work at it steadily down here."

"If I don't feel too out of touch with everything."

"Have you got to send the first few chapters in by any particular date?"

"Vincent Andrews wants them in two months."

"Can you manage that?"

"I expect so. Yes, easily, actually. I want to write this and when you want to write a thing it pours out of you. They're talking about publishing in the spring. If they like it, that is, of course."

"Oh, I expect they'll like it all right."

Arthur shrugged his shoulders.

"Won't it mean an awful lot of looking up things and references and so on?"

"Yes, quite a bit. And then there's the actual typing, of course. I was thinking about this on the way down in the train. I don't know if it would be possible to get some part-time person locally to do say two half-days typing a week for me. It might be somebody who could give you a hand too, in the house."

"I shouldn't think it likely. Part-timers aren't easy to come by. And I don't think we can afford it, anyway."

"Oh, hell to that. Let me decide that. You can't make money unless you're prepared to spend a bit. Switch on the radio again."

Obediently Jean leant forward and turned the knob of the set. Nothing happened.

"See if the plug's in," she said after they had waited a minute in silence.

"It must be in. You had the set on when I came into the room."



"Have a look," she advised. "It gets jerked out sometimes."

Arthur leant down by the side of his chair and discovered that the plug had in fact been "jerked out." Grumbling uncomprehendingly he put it back and the set came to life.

Two minutes later he crossed over and switched it off.

"Boring," he said. "They put an awful lot of thin stuff in the programmes these days."

Jean, who, in fact, had been enjoying the programme, made no comment.

After a pause, and not sure that it was a wise subject to embark on, she asked: "Have you ever noticed anything funny about this house, Arthur?"

"Funny? How do you mean?"

"I don't mean anything I mind, or anything I'm afraid of; but there *are* some things that are a little odd."

"For instance?"

"Some of the furniture gets moved about sometimes."

Arthur looked sceptical. "I don't see how you can remember exactly where every piece of furniture was the last time you were in a room," he said. "It's easy enough to imagine things have been moved."

"What about that end window then?"

"What about it?"

"The first week or ten days we were in here the curtain was nearly always pulled back after I drew it."

"But you don't draw it."

"Not now."

"It can't be pulled back if you don't draw it to start with."

Jean laughed. "All right. What about the plug for the wireless just now?"

"But you said yourself that it often gets jerked out. You must have pulled it by mistake when you turned off the set."

Jean changed the conversation. "I saw Richard Foster in Witherley this morning," she said.

"What were you doing in Witherley?"

"Shopping, Arthur. What we eat has to be bought, you know, from the butcher and so on."

"Must you try to be sarcastic?"

"I went in on the ten o'clock bus and walked back."

"God, you must be mad."

"Actually, I enjoyed it. It wouldn't hurt you to take more exercise."

"God forbid."

"But seriously, Arthur. Richard says there's quite a good tennis club in Witherley."

"Richard?"

"Richard Foster. The young man from the agents. I was telling you I'd seen him this morning."

"Didn't he call in here for tea with you some weeks ago?"

"He happened to be going by and looked in to see how we were liking the house."

"Is this boy falling for you?"

"Don't be silly, Arthur."

"Well, you probably find it boring all alone here, whilst I'm up in London."

"No. I don't mind being alone at all."

"I should. I should be bored to tears." He glanced up at the clock. "Speaking of being bored, I think I'll go down to the Clarendon for half an hour."

"Must you, Arthur?"

"There's no 'must' about it. I just want to, that's all. I've had a busy day in London and I feel like a drink at the local. What's wrong with that?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing."

"Don't be so small-minded about it then. Are you coming?"

Jean leant over and switched the radio on again.

"No. I'll stop here and listen to this."

The Clarendon was an old-fashioned public house standing on the road into the town about a quarter of a mile from the gate of Platts. Arthur was by now a recognised figure there and was generally known as "the gentleman who had come to live at Platts."

On this particular evening the bar was emptier than usual, in fact only two other people were there when Arthur came in: an old man sitting at a table in a corner, whom he recognised as a regular; and a thick-set, red-faced, aggressive looking man with a soft black hat pushed back off his forehead, standing at the bar with a double Scotch in front of him.

The landlord greeted Arthur from behind the bar and poured out his drink for him.

"How are you getting settled in at Platts, sir?" he asked conversationally.

The red-faced man pricked up his ears at the mention of Platts and took an interested look at Arthur.

"Are you the gentleman who bought Platts?" he asked.

Arthur nodded. It didn't seem worth while explaining that the property had in fact been left to his wife by somebody else's will.

"That's right," he said.

"You've got a nice little property there, mister," the man said. "With possibilities." He motioned to Arthur to put his money back in his pocket and said: "This is on me. I'm in the chair."

Arthur was at his best standing at a bar drinking in company, and presently he and the red-faced man and a couple of other casuals who had looked in were firmly established in the sort of easy intimacy which drinking brings.

Arthur was a great believer in the value of the local as a mine of useful knowledge and presently he found an occasion to ask the landlord if he happened to know

of anyone in Witherley who would be interested in doing some part-time typing.

Since he never lost an opportunity of building up his own stock, having learnt that people were inclined to take you at your own valuation and that a high valuation meant a lot of credit, he added in explanation that he had a great deal of commissioned writing work on hand ("books and B.B.C. scripts and so forth") and that some form of help was becoming essential.

The landlord listened, interested and visibly impressed. Part-time typing and so forth wasn't much in his line, he explained, but in his business you often picked up unexpected bits of information and he would certainly keep his ears open.

Meanwhile, everyone in the chance-made group had by now stood his round of drinks, the two casuals had departed and a fresh couple, a young man and his girl, had come in.

The newcomers were obviously interested only in themselves so that Arthur and the red-faced man were thrown into greater intimacy.

Each had by now conceived a respect for the other as a genuine whisky drinker and Arthur's doubts about the contents of his note-case being equal to the strain were largely eased by the generosity of the other man who insisted that the majority of drinks should be on him.

By this time they had learnt one another's names and whilst the landlord was filling up their glasses again the red-faced man said in a confidential way:

"Couldn't help hearing what you were saying about your writing and so forth Mr. Engleton. You must be a very clever man. I always say anyone who writes has got to be clever. Pretty paying sort of job too, I suppose?"

By this time Arthur had had enough drink to make him particularly candid.

“Worst paid profession in the world, old boy.”

“Really? But film rights and all that sort of thing. I thought some of you chaps made really big money.”

“Some.”

“Incidentally, this part-time typing business. There was a girl, well a woman, a good looker too, who helped me out in the office a bit when labour was very short. She used to come in afternoons and she was pretty useful. I don’t know if she’d be any good to you.”

“Does she live locally? I mean could I get in touch with her?”

“She lives in Witherley somewhere. That I do know. But I haven’t got her address in my head. I’ll look it up in the office and let you have it.”

“I wish you would, Mr. Lumley.”

“There’s another thing that makes me think you’re clever, Mr. Engleton besides being a writer——”

Arthur looked up surprised and pleased. Nothing is more gratifying than the recognition by the world of one’s own abilities.

Mr. Lumley lowered his voice, “That’s buying a place like Platts,” he went on.

“You think it’s a nice little property?”

“Mr. Engleton, I’ll be frank with you. I think it’s a hell of a poor property in some ways. Which I am quite sure you do, being the clever person you are. But, like I said earlier on in the evening, it’s a place with possibilities.”

“What sort of possibilities?”

“Let’s get filled up again shall we—no, no with me, *please*—and then we can go over to the table in the corner and have a chat.”

Maurice Lumley, builder, reckoned that this was a fortunate meeting for him. But like many of the fortunate events in his life it was not due entirely to chance.

He had heard that the new owner of Platts was a fairly regular user of the Clarendon, and he had been coming



in there lately a lot himself in the hope that they might run into one another.

Maurice Lumley, aged forty-eight, was a self-made man. He was shrewd and a born gambler. Ten years ago he had been an ordinary "brickie" laying his daily quota of bricks according to union rules and picking up his money—eleven pounds if he was lucky—regularly every week.

Eleven pounds a week, however regularly it might come in, was little use to Maurice Lumley. It wasn't what he understood by money. Eleven pounds was the sort of money made by the mugs; Lumley wanted the other sort, the sort made out of mugs. Whilst he was laying bricks he learnt enough about the prices paid for land and the development of land as housing estates to make him realise that in England to-day it was very much a case of nothing venture, nothing win, but venture something and win a lot.

His first transaction carried out whilst he was still bricklaying was to buy up a derelict cottage on the west side of Witherley with borrowed money, do it up almost entirely by his own personal labour, advertise it in the local paper and sell it without any trouble to a retired couple from Colchester.

When the deal was completed and the money in the bank Lumley sat one evening studying the details of it still incredulously.

If he didn't charge anything for his own labour the transaction had netted him a clear profit—and the money was there to his credit in Barclay's bank to prove it—of thirteen hundred pounds. A sum which it would take him two and a half years to earn in the normal way.

After that he never looked back. If a piece of land or an old house came into the market anywhere within a five mile radius of Witherley he was after it.

His purse wasn't always long enough to get what he wanted and on one occasion, having got what he wanted,

he spent a great deal more on development and then burnt his fingers badly.

But by and large he prospered. It was a long time now since he had laid any bricks. He had a large Austin saloon now and a daughter at an expensive school. He kept his stockbroker busy and his bank manager was very polite to him. He was where he had purposely set out to be, in the money.

All this had been achieved by a large number of comparatively small transactions, nearly all of them had been successful and success had snowballed into prosperity. But when he travelled about and saw the schemes which some of the really big builders and contractors were undertaking he realised what chicken feed M. Lumley Ltd. of Witherley was dealing in.

For some time now he had been looking for the chance of launching a big scheme of his own and although he was sometimes tempted to strike out in another part of the country instinct told him to stick to Witherley.

Witherley, his feeling told him, was just prosperous enough and had not yet been exploited too much.

The electrification of the railway line would be completed next year and the demand for houses would surely be intensified. Added to which Lumley had heard rumours that a sub-station was to be built in the area by the Atomic Energy Commission and if that came off houses would certainly be at a premium.

What the estate builder had been looking for was a property not too close to Witherley which could be bought up reasonably cheaply and which was large enough to develop as a building estate with a minimum of twelve (and even better, twenty-four) houses on it.

When in his travels round the district he happened to see Platts one day he began to think that he might have found what he was looking for.

There were certain disadvantages, the chief being that the site was a little out of the way; but there was a bus

service of a sort even now past the place and Lumley felt confident that if a dozen new houses were put up it would be possible to persuade the council to put on some extra buses.

The question of getting a permit to develop the land as he wanted was a much more vital matter; but by this stage in his career Maurice Lumley had had a wide experience of Rural District Councils, of Town and Country Planning Authorities and of local surveyors.

"There's a back-stairs up to everything," was one of his firmest beliefs, and he was now in a position where he considered it absolutely safe to assume that if he did apply for a licence to develop Platts as a housing estate it would be granted.

Careful inquiries about the property itself had not told him much and whilst he was still trying to discover who owned it and whether it was for sale a fresh owner had suddenly appeared and settled in it.

A fresh owner who obviously liked his Scotch.

"Good health," said Maurice Lumley, raising his glass. Arthur nodded genially; by now he had had quite enough and was feeling warm and mellow.

"I expect you're a country lover, Mr. Engleton?"

"Me? God, no. Give me London every time. Chelsea for choice. What's all this about possibilities at Platts?"

"Oh, nothing. Only an idea of mine. You see, I've always liked the place."

"It's not a bad house," Arthur agreed cautiously. "Not a bad house at all."

"It's a very nice house."

"I thought you said it was a hell of a poor property just now."

"No offence intended, Mr. Engleton. What I meant was that it's a bit old-fashioned and it's in pretty poor repair and decoration. If a man is going to live there and make a really good place of it he's got to lay out a tidy bit of money."

"I can't afford much on decoration and repairs," Arthur said.

Lumley smiled in an understanding way. "Well, who can these days?" he asked. "Unless he's in the trade, like me and can get it done cheap—but don't get me wrong I'm not trying to get a contract to do the place up for you."

"I'm just wondering what you *are* trying to do."

"Mr. Engleton, I'll be frank with you. I'm not a clever man like you and I've always gone straight for what I wanted. If you're in the market I want to buy Platts. There."

"You want to buy it?"

"I do. And I'll give you a goodish price for it. And shall I tell you why I want to buy it first?"

"I suppose you want to live there?"

"That's part of it. I do want to live there; but for a special reason. I'm thinking about giving up the building trade and going in for tomatoes."

"Tomatoes?"

"I don't say there's big money in them. But if you go the right way about it there's money. And at Platts you've got one greenhouse already and there's plenty of room to put up a couple more. But of course you may not want to sell."

"It all depends on how much you are prepared to pay."

"That's the most sensible answer you could have given, Mr. Engleton. Platts isn't everybody's house, for one reason or another, and I think the proper market value of it is probably about five and a half thousand, perhaps a shade under. But I realise that it may be a bit of a nuisance to you moving out before you've properly moved in as you might say and I don't believe in haggling anyway. For a quick sale and vacant possession I'm prepared to give you six thousand and that's my last word."

He drained his drink and signalled to the landlord to replenish the glasses—"One for the road," he explained, "and it's been very nice meeting you, Mr. Engleton. You think over what I've just said."

"I certainly will."

"Six thousand pounds doesn't grow on trees even to-day," Lumley said; and walking back in the dark along the still unfamiliar road Arthur reflected on how true this was. He also thought how thoroughly the evening had justified his contention that the place to make contacts and pick up business tips was a pub.

If they sold Platts for six thousand they could go back to London and find some comfortable little flat in Chelsea and have no worries at all about living expenses for the next few years.

"If it was mine I'd sell it to-morrow," he said aloud and the thought carried with it the uncomfortable remembrance that Platts was *not* his and that unless Jean could be persuaded in the matter he was powerless to sell it to-morrow or on any other day.

When he turned in at the drive and saw the drawing-room light still on he was first of all glad. He could discuss the matter of the sale straight away; and it wouldn't be difficult surely to make her realise what a splendid offer he had been clever enough to get.

But half-way up the drive he wasn't so sure; his confidence oozed a little.

He was drunk and he knew it.



## CHAPTER VI

JEAN HAD been listening to some music on the Home programme; but listening also for the sounds of Arthur's return. She didn't want him to be drunk.

What she wanted more than she had ever wanted anything in her life was to settle down at Platts; to be able to stay on there; to make a home there where Arthur could do his work and where she could feel that she belonged.

When she heard the front door open she said quickly under her breath : "*Please let it be all right*" and she would have had a hard job to explain exactly whom the prayer was addressed to.

Arthur came in and slumped into a chair opposite her.

He had certainly had too much to drink but he was amiable. And for that, she supposed, she must be thankful.

"I thought you'd be in bed," he said.

"It's not very late."

"When the pubs close in the country it's the end of everything. Not like London."

"You'll be able to work better here than you did in London."

"What was wrong with the work I did in London?"

"I don't say there was anything wrong with it but I still think you can work better down here. Fewer distractions."

"I like distractions. I don't believe anyone ever worked well surrounded by cabbages. I'm not at all sure that we didn't make a mistake coming here."

"What else could we have done?"

"No. Well, I agree there. It was a heaven-sent bolt

hole. But there's no reason why we should stay here."

"There's every reason. It's a home——"

"You and I aren't the homy sort. A flat in a London mews is home enough for us."

"Not for me, Arthur. I'm beginning to want something I can call our own. Somewhere we can't be turned out of."

"If you've got six thousand quid in the bank you needn't worry about that sort of thing."

"Six thousand pounds?"

"I expect that's the sort of price we could get for this place if we sold it."

"Arthur, you've been talking about this in the Clarendon?"

"Not exactly. I didn't introduce the subject anyway."

"Who did introduce it?"

"A man was talking——"

"What man?"

"I've never seen him before. A man. Any man. All I know is he said people would be willing, in fact he said *he* was willing to give us six thousand pounds for the place as it stands. There."

A cold fear contracted Jean's heart. She could understand only too well the lure which the mere words "six thousand pounds" had on Arthur's mind. She would have to fight for Platts.

"What on earth would anyone want to pay six thousand for Platts for?" she asked lightly.

"Turn it into a sort of small-holding. Put up some glass houses. Grow tomatoes."

"Couldn't we go in for that sort of thing, tomatoes and fruit and so on?"

"Don't make me laugh."

"I don't see why not."

Arthur felt like flying into a rage and storming at her; but he had the sense to check himself. *After all, she owned Platts.* No getting away from that.

She owned the place and if he couldn't talk her into doing what he wanted he wouldn't get anywhere.

"The point is," he said, slurring his speech in his effort to appear particularly reasonable, "the point is that you've got to take your chances in life. Never get on if you don't. Never get anywhere. Just piddle about doing reviews for two guineas a time. Damn' good reviews, too."

"That's why I want you to get on with your book and you must have somewhere you can write it."

"What I've always been short of is capital."

"We've got Platts now. A home. Somewhere to live. That is capital in a way, surely."

"It isn't money in the bank. With six thousand quid in the bank——"

"Arthur, I warn you, I'm not selling Platts."

"All I say is think it over. If we had six thousand——"

"We've got Platts."

"I say sell it and have the money instead."

"When I'm dead you can do what you like with the place, Arthur. Until then I'm not selling it."

"No need to get melodramatic over it."

Jean had to laugh at the absurdity of his accusation and her laughter riled him. But in reality he was riled even more by the fuddled realisation that he had mis-handled this whole question of selling the place. If he had been wise he wouldn't have said a word about it to-night; it would have been better to wait till the morning. Now she would simply put it down to some casual drink-inspired talk in the Clarendon. . . .

"And I must say," Jean said suddenly, "if that's the sort of conversation you get into at the Clarendon, I don't think much of it."

"The Clarendon is a perfectly good pub."

"Why not give pubs a miss for a bit?"

"In the name of God what would there be to do down here if it wasn't for the local?"

"Why not try spending the evening at home for a change?"

"Listening to the drivel on that machine?"

"Working, if you like."

"Don't I work hard enough already?"

"Arthur, this is a chance for us. We've got a house of our own. A home. We don't have to creep in and out afraid of running into somebody because we haven't paid the rent. We can make good here."

"I've no ambition to make good as a cabbage. And we've had all this out anyway."

"Better a cabbage than a sponge."

"I suppose you think I've had too much to drink——"

"Oh, Arthur, Arthur. I simply refuse to discuss what you've had to drink. It's too tedious and silly. Why in the name of heaven don't men ever grow up about that sort of thing? If you can't see that you are your own worst enemy, standing in the way of everything you could do, then you can't see anything. Of course you've had too much to drink——"

"Thanks very much."

"And some smart alick at the Clarendon has been twisting you round his little finger, or just pulling your leg."

"Thanks very much again."

"But you can put any ideas of selling this place right out of your head, Arthur. Platts means something to me. It's *mine*. This has never happened to me before in my life, that a part of the world actually belongs to me. As I've told you, you can do what you like with it when I'm dead and buried, but as long as I'm alive I'm never going to sell it. You've got a home here, why don't you make up your mind to settle down and work? Write something really good; you can, you know."

"What touching faith in my ability."

Jean rose. "I'm going to bed Arthur. You had better sleep in your dressing-room I think."

"Is this to make it quite clear who owns the house and who doesn't?"

"It's to make it quite clear that I see no attraction in sharing a room with a man who never knows when he has had enough to drink."

"For the third and last time thanks very much."

Arthur woke at three. Stone cold sober. He was used to this odd habit of his metabolism. Frequently when he went to bed well on the way to being fuddled he would wake in the small hours with his mind entirely clear again.

The illuminated hands of his watch had told him the time before he remembered that he was sleeping alone in his dressing-room.

The conversation with Jean flooded back into his now quick-thinking brain.

Hell . . . he had bungled it badly; naturally, introducing it then, straight out of the Clarendon with a bit of a load on board, it must have sounded damned silly . . . he ought to have waited. . . .

He wanted a cigarette now to think this out. He stretched out his hand carefully, made contact with the bedside lamp, ran his fingers up it and pressed the switch. There was the slight click of the switch going home but nothing else happened.

He pressed the switch back and it clicked again. No light.

"What the hell," he said crossly; the bulb must have gone because he remembered distinctly that when he had gone to bed the bedside lamp had been on.

Putting it out had been his last conscious act.

Now he was thoroughly wakened and the craving for a smoke was on him. He got out of bed, crossed the room cautiously in the dark and found the light switch by the door. The top light came on and he found his cigarettes and matches on the dressing-table.

As he was getting back into bed, his cigarette alight,



he noticed the cord of the bedside lamp. It lay in a tangle in front of the bed and he could distinctly see the plug which should have been pressed home in the wall socket.

Which, when he first got into bed, must have been pressed home in the wall socket.

He stared at it uncomprehendingly and with elusive echoes of something Jean had been saying about the same sort of thing running through his head.

He couldn't quite remember what he was trying to think of and he couldn't understand the business of the plug so he got into bed and, hands behind his head, lay smoking and thinking.

He was thinking of six thousand pounds.

Money, because he had never had any quantity of it, had always been an obsession with him and six thousand pounds sounded like a whole lot of it.

The more he thought over the conversation with Jean the more he saw how stupid he had been and, he flattered himself, it wasn't like him to be stupid.

He should have timed his operation better.

Not that he regarded the cause as lost. In the past he had usually been able to get his own way with Jean either by sheer persistence and wearing her down, or by a little delicate manipulation of truth.

He went carefully over what they had said to one another. . . .

At three o'clock in the morning words can seem clearer and more suggestive, more frightening even in their possibilities, than they ever did when they were said four hours earlier in the give and take of conversation.

The man on the bed lit a second cigarette from the stub of his first and let his thoughts turn on something his wife had said twice whilst they had been talking together.

*"In the day-time, normally," he told himself, "I wouldn't be thinking like this, but at night, at this hour, alone, you let your thoughts turn to all sorts of possibilities. . . ."*

Next morning he mentioned the matter of the bedside light to Jean, but she merely laughed at it and refused to believe that the light was on when he got into bed.

When he insisted that he knew it was she only laughed again and said that the house must be angry with him.

“That’s a silly thing to say.”

“Keep a candle by your bed in case it happens again; only don’t set fire to the place.”

No reference was made to the conversation of the previous evening and, to Jean’s intense relief, Arthur did not reintroduce the subject of selling the house.

She could not, of course, be sure that he had given up the idea completely since she had learnt from long experience that one of the most difficult things to predict about the man she was married to was in what things he would be persistent and in what faint-hearted.

He would start up half a dozen hares and not bother about pursuing one of them; and then, unexpectedly, he would get hold of an idea and cling to it with often dangerous persistence.

But she thought: if he doesn’t say anything more about it, I certainly shan’t, and she was content to leave it like that.

A week after their conversation on the subject Jean went into Witherley for the afternoon. Arthur had settled down well to writing his book, but he was a slow writer and needed intense concentration for a long time to produce any reasonable quantity of work. Also he could never discipline himself to regular hours but alternated between doing nothing (and being made miserable by doing nothing) and working for six or even eight hours at a stretch, and subsequently feeling completely exhausted as a result.

He was in one of his working moods now so she had left him in the study to make the expedition to Witherley.

In the afternoon this was a simple matter since a bus

passed the gate of Platts shortly after two-thirty and there was one back from Witherley at four-ten.

This gave good time to get the week's shopping done, provided that you knew just what you wanted to do and that the queues weren't too long.

By four o'clock Jean had finished all her shopping and now had nothing to do but wait for the bus back. She was walking easily towards the starting point when a voice behind her said:

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Engleton."

She turned round and there was Richard Foster.

"It's the first time I've seen you in Witherley," he said.

"I don't come in very often. About once a week to do the shopping."

"I suppose you wouldn't like to come and have a cup of tea with me?"

"I'd love to, Richard. Actually I'm dying for a cup. But I can't. The bus goes back in ten minutes."

"Haven't you come in by car?"

"We haven't got a car."

"Oh, I thought—— I didn't realise that. But that's all right. We can have tea together and then I'll run you back in my car. I'd love to."

"I don't think I——"

"Please, Mrs. Engleton——"

"I certainly won't if you call me Mrs. Engleton, you promised to say 'Jean.'"

"Please, Jean."

What harm in having a cup of tea with an acquaintance? Absolutely none, Jean told herself; and in any case she wanted tea and it would be much nicer going back by car than in the bus.

So tea together it was in a place of Richard's choosing, The Willow Tree Café ("we often pop in here from the office for a cup of coffee") and afterwards Richard, delighted at the chance of showing off his car, drove her back to Platts.

Or nearly to Platts. A couple of hundred yards from the gate where there was a convenient place to turn in the road she said: "Drop me here and I'll walk the rest."

You never knew with Arthur; Jean had every reason to suspect that he had been involved in three different affairs since they were married yet he was capable of sudden and intense jealousies. So there was no point, she argued with herself, in advertising the fact that she happened to have met young Richard Foster; on the other hand she doubted whether it was altogether wise to act as she had done. It was tantamount to admitting to Richard that there was some sort of secret between them and she knew by now that he was only too open for such a suggestion.

Perhaps nothing of particular significance had been said during tea; yet all had been significant. It was quite impossible to be blind to the fact that Richard had fallen for her. He was going through a phase, which any ardent romantic boy of eighteen finds it only too easy to be in, of falling in love with a woman ten years older, a woman who seemed to him sophisticated, of the world; and who, above all, was married.

Jean saw all this. She had not exaggerated when she had suggested to Richard that the mere gap in years didn't really represent the difference in age between them.

You could talk to yourself wisely like this, she thought; you could tell yourself that he was little more than a schoolboy experiencing perhaps his first love affair; you could write it all off as an infatuation, as "being in love with love"; but nothing altered the fact that deep inside you, undeniable in the core of your woman's heart, was the satisfaction that comes from being loved.

A woman wanted by a man, by any man, is a woman with her feelings intensified, her whole appreciation of living and her response to it doubled.

"Foolish," "boyish," "nothing in it"—all these

phrases might dutifully parade themselves in the front of Jean's mind as she turned in at the gate and walked up the drive but behind them, in her heart rather than her mind, stirred the warming and disturbing knowledge that a man was in love with her.

She was surprised to see Arthur on the front-door step talking to someone. A man she didn't know. Short, thick-necked, red-faced.

"This is Mr. Lumley," Arthur said, "he promised to let me have the address of a local woman who might do some typing for me and he has very kindly called to give it me."

Mr. Lumley took the hint. A great deal of his success in life had come from knowing when not to speak. What Arthur Engleton had said was perfectly true, but it wasn't the whole truth. But if that was how he wanted the game played that would be how Mr. Lumley would play it.

He touched his black fedora, said something about "must be getting on" and, accompanied by Arthur, walked to the side of the house where a large Austin saloon stood.

Jean watched the two men. She didn't disbelieve what Arthur had said; there was no reason why she should, yet instinctively she mistrusted the thick-set Lumley.

When they reached the car she turned and went into the house; it was cool inside and welcoming. She was glad to be back and, whether she was deluding herself in the matter or not she wasn't sure, she thought that the house, for its part, was glad to see her.

Arthur was much longer coming in than she expected and when he eventually did appear he looked hot and a little breathless.

She asked him what was the matter.

"Somebody must have come up the drive whilst Lumley and I were out at the back," he said, "some wretched schoolboy I suppose. The air had been let out of all his tyres."



Jean stared at him with a smile dawning on her face. She thought the hypothesis of a passing schoolboy highly unlikely. She thought that the house didn't like Mr. Lumley any more than she did.

Something in what Arthur had said struck her.

"If Mr. Lumley only came to give you an address," she asked, "what were you doing out at the back with him?"

"Just talking, that's all," her husband answered a shade too easily. "This is the part-time typist he recommends." He flipped over a piece of paper and, picking it up, Jean read without much curiosity the name:

Mrs. Stockley  
Mill Cottage

She handed it back without comment; she was wondering now what Lumley had really come to talk about.

## CHAPTER VII

ARTHUR WAS never at his best at the breakfast table especially when he had a rejected article in the post to irritate him and to make him aware once again of the insecurity and precariousness of things.

What hurt him most about any rejection of his work was not so much the loss of a possible cheque (though this was serious enough) as the affront to his dignity, the feeling that somebody had considered something of his and not thought it good enough.

On a morning shortly after Mr. Lumley's visit to Platts he threw aside the article which had come back with a curt rejection slip and stared moodily across at Jean.

"Who are your two letters from?" he asked, not because

he really wanted to know but to have something to talk, and if possible to quarrel, about.

It was, as a matter of fact, a slightly embarrassing question, for Jean knew only too well that if her husband was given any opportunity for interfering violently and unpleasantly in her affairs he would do so.

"One's from Ursula Hind. I used to be at school with her and we haven't seen one another for years! "

"And the other? "

Jean gathered the letters up and put them away in what she hoped was an unhurried manner.

"Only a circular about clothes."

Her husband watched the letters disappearing from sight.

"Looked a funny sort of circular to me," he said.

"Arthur, you're not by any chance *jealous* about my letters are you? "

"I merely asked whom they were from."

"And I told you. Why should you be jealous, anyway? "

"Why shouldn't I be, anyway, if it comes to that. After all you are my wife."

"In name."

"It was you who insisted on my sleeping in my dressing-room."

"Because a time comes in everything, but especially in human relations, when it's no good pretending any more."

"I didn't realise our marriage had degenerated into a pretence."

"It needn't, Arthur. There's a lot we can salvage and cling on to. We've a home here and you've your work."

"A lot of good that looks like being when everything I write is rejected."

"That's only one article. You've still got your book."

"If I can write it stuck away down here."

"This is just the place where you *can* write it."

"I don't agree. What I've lacked all my life is a bit of capital, of solid cash, behind me. Now that we've got a good offer for the house the only really sensible thing to do is to sell it and go back to London."

Jean shook her head. "Never, Arthur. We've got a home here and an anchorage. Something of our own. I'm never going back to that business of running from one cheap hotel to another because we couldn't pay the rent."

Arthur lit a cigarette and flicked the spent match away angrily. What he was angry about was the fact that in this particular matter his wife had the power in her hands and if she didn't choose to think along his lines nothing he could say or do could make her.

"You never have understood business and you never will," he said crossly.

Jean had more sense than to argue. She simply smiled (thus infuriating Arthur still further) and left the room.

Later, when Arthur was safely in his study—presumably working at his book—and she was alone she drew out her two letters to look at them again. Or rather to look at one of them again.

One of them, as she had correctly told her husband, was from a girl she had been friendly with since school-days but had not seen for a long time. It was not this letter that interested her now. It was the second that she wanted to read again. It had nothing to do with clothes and it was not a circular.

It was from Richard Foster and she was disturbed by the tone of it.

Superficially there was nothing much in what the young man had written. His news was that he was being transferred to a London office of estate agents for experience for three months and would be staying in rooms at an address in Russell Street. He hoped, if she happened to be in Town during the time, that they might see one another, perhaps . . .

What disturbed but, she had to admit it, also touched, Jean about Richard's letter was the underlying tone of it.

You didn't have to be a very sensitive woman (and in many ways Jean *was* extremely sensitive) to realise that here was a boy dangerously in love.

When she had said that sentence to herself Jean crossed the room and looked in a mirror.

She wondered, as every woman does when a man falls in love with her, just what it was that had done the trick.

What she saw in the glass was not too displeasing. In spite of nine years of tempestuous living with Arthur she still had plenty of good looks. She even fancied that since coming to live at Platts she had improved in looks slightly.

But she didn't intend to let this embryonic affair with young Richard Foster develop. She was much too generous minded and sincere for that. She liked the boy and it was flattering that he more than liked her; but there, she told herself, it must end.

At four o'clock that afternoon she walked into the Witherley office of Bayley and Foster and, as luck would have it, Richard was in the outer office.

She was amused, and dismayed, to see the look that came into his eyes when he saw her. He rose to his feet, and before he could say anything Jean said lightly:

"Richard, I happened to be in Witherley for the afternoon and I was wondering if you could spare half an hour and we could have tea together."

"*Of course.*"

"Perhaps it doesn't suit you to come out now?"

"Perhaps it *does*. I'll just fix it with one of the girls." He disappeared into an inner office and was back again in a couple of minutes.

"Pam will keep an eye on the outer office and old man Bayley is out for the afternoon so I'm as free as the air. How perfectly marvellous of you to call in."

He said it again—"How perfectly marvellous of you to think of it"—when they sat down opposite one another in The Willow Tree Café.

Jean smiled at him. His excitement and enthusiasm shone out of his eyes and no woman can light those fires in a man and be unmoved by the fact.

"Richard," she said, "it isn't as marvellous as all that and we've got to be sensible."

His face fell at once.

"Did my letter make you cross, then?"

"No. Of course not. Not cross. There's nothing to be cross about. It will be rather fun for you, doing this job in London, won't it?"

"Yes. Especially if you are going to be up there at all."

Jean shook her head.

"Richard, you and I won't be meeting in London."

"You *are* cross then?"

"No. I'm not cross."

"Why not, then?"

"Because we've got to be sensible."

"Oh, sensible. I didn't think you'd talk like that. Honestly, I didn't. You must know how I feel about you——"

"Richard——"

"No, it's no good trying to shut me up. People must say what they feel, or nothing ever means anything."

"It doesn't always pay to say just what you feel."

"You don't think one should only say what *pays*, surely?"

Jean flushed slightly.

"No, of course not."

"Then I can say that I'm in love with you."

She hadn't wanted the words said; but now human-wise, woman-wise, she wouldn't have had them unsaid. She smiled at him.

"I mean it," he affirmed in desperate eagerness.



"Of course you do. I know that. But answer me one question——"

"Of course. You can ask me anything."

"Have you ever been in love before?"

"No. Not really. Of course I've been a bit interested in one or two girls. But they were only kids really. This isn't like that. You're different. Completely."

"Richard, whatever happens I think it is sweet of you to say that. I mean that."

"I don't want you to think it's sweet of me."

"Richard, listen to me. What you're quite sure about now you will have forgotten in a year's time."

He flushed. "That wasn't sweet of you, to say that. And I shan't, anyway. I suppose you—you don't—well, it doesn't mean anything like this to you, does it?"

Jean looked around for the right words to use. She wanted to prevent this conversation from getting serious, to keep it in perspective; but it had to be done without hurting a boy who thought that he was deadly serious and who, for the moment, couldn't help seeing things out of all true perspective. She looked round for the right words and it was difficult to find them.

"You asked me a question," he went on, "and I answered it. Can I ask you one, now?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"You asked me if I had ever been in love before and I ask you if you are in love now?"

"With you?"

"No. Not with me."

Jean paused for a moment.

"You mean with my husband?"

"Yes."

She paused again slightly and then said:

"Somehow things don't work out quite like that, Richard. Black or white. Yes or no. I'm married to Arthur and we owe loyalty to one another. There's a compact and we want to stick to it."

"Is that all?"

For a moment she was nettled by the youthful disdain in his voice.

"No. It isn't all. And anyway it's a lot. But it isn't all. Arthur has a great deal of talent. I don't say he always makes the most of it. He doesn't. But he hasn't always had the breaks, either. If he can settle down to this book of his he might get somewhere yet."

"I'm sorry. I ought to have known that, being you, that's just the way you would feel about it all."

"Don't give me a halo, Richard."

"You'll always have one as far as I am concerned."

Jean smiled at him and nodded and said: "Now, let's talk about other things."

"The house. Platts. Do you like it now you've settled in?"

"I *love* it."

"You don't mind the, well, the odd things that are supposed to happen in it?"

"That *do* happen in it, Richard. Don't try to rob me of my poltergeist. I like him and I think he likes me."

"I don't see how anybody could possibly not do that."

Jean stretched across the table and put her hand for a moment on his.

"You say very nice things to me and I like it, but you mustn't go on saying them."

"And I suppose you won't come and see me in London?"

"Let's leave things as they are for the moment."

Walking to the bus stop Jean went over this conversation in her mind and hoped that she had done the right thing in taking Richard out and talking to him. She liked the boy so much that the last thing in the world that she wanted to do was to hurt him in any way.

The stop for the Witherley Marsh bus was away from the main part of the town and there were seldom more than two or three people waiting there. On this particular

afternoon Jean was standing there alone and had another ten minutes to wait when a small saloon car passed and then stopped. The driver opened the near side window and shouted:

"Want a lift to the Marsh?"

Jean hesitated for a second but the temptation to accept the lift was too strong to resist.

"Do you go along Marsh Road?" she asked.

"That's right."

"Past a house called Platts?"

"Platts? I know it well. Right past the drive entrance. Jump in."

As they were rattling along in the small and antiquated car the man asked:

"Is Platts where you live?"

"Yes. I—we've come there fairly recently. How is it that you know it?"

"I did a job there when the old lady had the lift put in. I'm an electrician and my firm did all the wiring and so on. I suppose the lift's still there O.K.?"

"Yes, it's still there, but we never use it."

"Well you wouldn't want to unless you were an invalid. More trouble than it's worth. Dangerous too if you've got kids about."

"We haven't any children."

The electrician laughed reminiscently. "Some funny things in Platts," he said.

"Funny? How do you mean?"

"Well, I'm a pretty careful sort of chap about my tools. Always have been. And normally I never lose anything. Can't afford to. But do you know when I was doing that lift job in Platts I simply could not keep a thing. If I put my bag of tools down for five minutes whilst I was working on the lift they'd all be gone. Not stolen, exactly, but scattered about. Sometimes quite close, sometimes right the other side of the house. I thought it was practical joking at first but in the end

I didn't know what to make of it. Of course I don't believe all the tales people tell about things like that, but I will say it was all rather funny."

When Jean was dropped at the gate she thanked the electrician and smiled to herself. She could well understand that the spirit of Platts would object to having an electric lift put into the house.

When she opened the front door and stepped into the hall she stood for a moment to let the house welcome her.

It was her house and she was glad to be in it again, and something which she couldn't define but equally which she couldn't mistake or misunderstand, told her yet again, that the house was glad to have her back.

## CHAPTER VIII

JEAN HAD answered the letter from her friend Ursula Hind and in reply had had a second letter suggesting that they might meet in London one day soon and spend the day together.

The idea appealed to her and she agreed to the suggested arrangements about meeting by postcard; but she was unprepared for the disagreeable way in which Arthur reacted to the idea.

She reminded herself bitterly that she certainly need not have been unprepared for his attitude in the matter; experience should have taught her that the mere fact of somebody else's doing something which he himself wanted to do was enough to make him determined to spoil their enjoyment of it if he could.

"But Arthur, there's no reason why I shouldn't go up to London for the day is there?"

"I might say the same thing about myself—why shouldn't I have a day in Town?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

"And then how will my book get written? I'm behind hand already with the first four or five chapters that Vincent Andrews wants to see."

"Stay here and work at it then. I haven't got a book to write."

"You're lucky."

"So are you. A few months ago we were being harried about from one cheap hotel to another; now——"

"Now we've got an out-of-date house stuck away in a godforsaken spot at the end of nowhere. Don't keep throwing this house in my face, for heaven's sake. The only sensible thing to do with Platts is to sell it and clear out."

"Oh, Arthur, we've had all this out before."

"Only too often. But you still won't see any sense. And anyway, what am I supposed to do for meals whilst you're away? Or don't I eat till you get back?"

"Don't be silly. I've just cooked you a good breakfast. I shall put a cold lunch all ready for you on a tray in the larder. And I shall be back in time to cook a hot meal for you to-night. That leaves tea which you can get for yourself."

"Thanks very much."

"Arthur, I haven't had a day away from it all for ages. I think I've earned one. You might try to be generous minded just once in a way; or does the idea of my enjoying myself annoy you so much?"

Arthur flushed and strode off moodily to his study.

It was an unpropitious beginning to Jean's day, but she was long since used to such scenes with Arthur and she did not intend to let this one interfere with her enjoyment.

She was surprised herself at the sense of adventure which three months of living at Platts gave to the business of going up to London for a day.

The arrangement was to meet Ursula at Fenwicks in Bond Street for an early lunch and although Jean had



plenty of time in hand she was so busy looking in shop windows that she was slightly late for the appointment.

Although they hadn't met for a long time the two women recognised one another at once, and Jean's first semi-dismayed, semi-humorous thought was "Heavens, I hope I haven't got as middle-aged looking as that"—an uneasiness which was allayed by Ursula's opening remark: "Darling Jean, you look just as smart as you ever did. How marvellous to have kept your figure like that!"

Ursula Hind was two years older than Jean and had always been inclined to plumpness. She had the happy, good-natured disposition that often goes with a generous figure and her inclination had always been to enjoy a good meal and to forget about the bathroom scales.

The two of them had a number of friends and acquaintances in common and much of their opening talk was of the "do you remember so-and-so?" or "whatever became of so-and-so?" variety.

But, as was inevitable, conversation soon came nearer home and presently they were discussing their own affairs.

Jean knew that Ursula had never married and could not help wondering at the fact, thinking that she was exactly the comfortable, homely type to make a success of marriage.

When she ventured to ask a tentative question on the subject Ursula showed no reluctance to talk about it.

"I wanted to, of course. I suppose every normal woman does. I still want to in some ways. I was actually engaged once, to a man a good deal older. I was absolutely head over heels about him. And I thought he was about me. He said he was, anyway.

"Everything seemed all right. The families got on and all that sort of thing. Mother liked him especially well and she got all worked up about having a huge wedding. Of course, theoretically I was old enough to

say and do what I liked, but I didn't want to upset her, and in any case I didn't object to a large wedding myself, only with mother it seemed to be the party and nothing else that mattered.

"In the end the problem didn't arise as three weeks before the day Colin ran off with somebody else."

"How perfectly frightful for you."

"It was pretty awful, what with wedding presents turning up by every post and so on. And however much a girl may try to disguise it or be offhand about it, what she is really reduced to saying, and everybody knows she is saying it, is 'he took a good look at me and decided I wasn't attractive enough.'"

"Poor Ursula."

Ursula laughed. "Don't think I feel bitter about it. I don't. Certainly not now. I don't know that I actually felt *bitter* at the time. Poor Colin, he never did know his own mind really and I sometimes think that he may have been frightened by mother's sort of avidness for the whole thing."

"And you've never wanted to marry anyone else since?"

"Not sufficiently to get upset about it. And that's how men seem to feel about me. I think they look on me as a jolly good sort, quite good fun to make up a four at tennis, and that sort of thing, but they aren't much interested after that."

"It doesn't seem to worry you much."

"Why should it? I get lots of fun out of life the way things are, and I dare say I'm spared quite a lot of worry and heartaches."

"Could be."

"It's true I would have liked children; but even they aren't always unmitigated blessings."

"I suppose not."

"Have you any children, Jean?"

"No. No, I haven't. At first, when we were married,

Arthur didn't want a family. He said 'Wait till we are a bit more settled' and as things turned out we never got more settled."

"What does your Arthur do? Write or something like that, isn't it?"

"Yes, he's a writer. And I suppose you've got to make a lot of allowances just because of that. These women with 'dull' husbands in 'dull' jobs in the City just don't know how lucky they are. A man who has his pen, and nothing else, to earn a living by takes too much out of himself all the time. Still"—she gave a little laugh—"I needn't have married a writer if I hadn't wanted to, need I?"

"One presumes you were in love with him."

"Yes, I suppose I was. I was. Only life does things to you, doesn't it? What you think is love at nineteen is very different from what you think is love at twenty-nine."

"Is Arthur successful with his writing?"

"Up to a point."

"Does he write novels?"

"All sorts of books; he's working on one now."

"I don't seem to have seen his name about much."

"He does articles and reviews mostly so you wouldn't."

"I suppose it's frightfully well paid, isn't it?"

"Oh, Ursula, how can you be so simple! Of course, freelance writing like that isn't well paid. For the last few years Arthur hasn't been earning as much per week as a police sergeant."

"How on earth have you managed?"

Jean hesitated for a moment. She hadn't wanted the conversation to take this turn. Yet clearly it was unavoidable that it should. And she had had to tell so many lies and make so many excuses in her life that she felt disinclined to repeat the process with Ursula.

Finally, and with an explosive sort of laugh, she said: "We haven't managed. Or hardly. That's about the truth of it. Until the last few months life had become

an absolute nightmare as far as I was concerned. Arthur hardly made any money, well I don't know that you can blame him for that exactly; but it was all the lies and tricks that went with it that I couldn't stomach. It came down to this, that if the choice lay between the rent and a bottle of whisky, the bottle of whisky won every time. How would you like to sneak out of one cheap, dingy hotel after another without paying what you owe and praying to God nobody would see you go?"

"How perfectly frightful!"

"*Perfectly frightful*," Jean repeated the words slowly, as though they were some kind of verdict which she was considering. "Yes. I can see that's how you must think of it. And I can see, now, that that's what it was. It *was* frightful. And the most frightful part of it, looking back, is that I was getting used to it as a way of living. I hated it, but I was getting used to it. If tricks, subterfuges Arthur calls them, were necessary to get us out of some jam we were in because we couldn't pay I was ready to do my share. I hated it, but I was getting used to it."

"I suppose, for one thing, you felt that you had to stick to Arthur?"

"I did stick to him; but I don't see I should expect any medals for it. After all, I married him."

"And do you love him still, Jean?"

Jean laughed. "I was asked that question, more or less, the other day. I'm not sure that I know what love is any longer. Arthur and I have grown used to one another. We are dependent on one another to some extent. I somehow feel my life is bound up with his, I mean that our destinies are bound up together."

"Do you ever go to a fortune-teller or astrologist, Jean?"

"I don't think I've ever been to one in my life. Not even in fun. I've never believed in that sort of thing."

"Oh, I do. And I've come to believe in it more and more lately. I'm quite sure some of these people really can

see what's going to happen to us and the direction we are going in and so on."

"What made you ask me that?"

"What you said about your destiny being tied up with Arthur's. I'm quite sure there are people whose lives are linked together in the plan; who can't really escape one another even if they try."

Jean shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe you're right."

"You said something about 'until the last few months,'" Ursula went on. "What did you mean by that?"

Jean told her about the legacy from Aunt Au and how they were now settled in Platts.

"My dear, how marvellous!"

"Yes. Quite soberly speaking it is marvellous. Especially when you think of the sort of life we were living. It's our stroke of luck; that's how I feel about it. I don't think anybody has a right to expect more than one big stroke of luck in their lives. Lots of people don't get even that. I feel that this is ours. A short time ago we literally didn't have anything in the world except what could be packed into three suitcases, now we've got a house."

"Is it a nice house?"

"I suppose it isn't all that much to look at. Victorian. But I love it."

"Does Arthur like it?"

"Arthur looks at everything in the same way—how much money could he get for it if he sold it. He can't see that some things are more valuable than money; the only thing he really understands is how money actually feels in his hand, or stuffing out his wallet."

"Is he going to sell the house then?"

Jean laughed. "He can't. It belongs to me."

Arthur was frequently irritated by Jean's presence and if the household routine interfered in any slight way



with his plans or comfort he would immediately start grumbling about "women getting in the way," but with the irrationality of the sublimely egotistical male he was quite able to persuade himself that he had a legitimate complaint against her for taking a day off and going up to Town.

He worked fairly steadily during the morning, reminding himself that he would have to get in touch with the part-time typist Lumley had suggested to him, as the book he was putting together demanded a good deal of typing out of long quotations from various sources. This mechanical sort of work always irked him and if arrangements could be made to get it done locally at a reasonable cost Arthur Engleton had no intention of doing it himself.

Normally Jean brought him a cup of tea at eleven o'clock, but as she was not there he first of all commiserated with himself on being done out of his tea and then, to compensate for it, mixed himself a whisky and soda which warmed and comforted him.

Jean had explained to him that his lunch would be set out on a tray in the larder; all he had to do was to carry it into the dining-room and eat it.

It was faintly annoying to find that everything was, in fact, prepared; something missing or forgotten would have been an excuse for self-pity, a sentiment that Arthur very much enjoyed.

With his lunch he treated himself to "the other half" of his drink, drinking it slowly and feeling grateful for the sense of well-being and self-sufficiency that it induced in him.

He didn't bother about washing up his luncheon things but merely bundled the whole tray out into the kitchen when he had finished.

At three he was back in his study, but the energy of the morning had faded away somehow and he was working in only the most desultory fashion.



In fact there were long periods when he was not working at all, but simply staring at figures which he had scribbled on the piece of green blotting-paper under his hand thinking about them.

Dreaming.

Dreaming of what could be done with six thousand, five hundred pounds. £6500. Of what that amount of money would actually look like, feel like. Of the texture and crinkle of it under his hands. Of Lumley's words when he had come up to Platts the afternoon that Jean had been in Witherley. Lumley's excuse had been that he had brought the name and address of the woman who might be useful for typing, but looking back on it Arthur could see that he had really come about the house. He was keen on it. That was obvious. Nor had he hidden it. He had admitted that he was keen. "I've made a bit of money in building but I've never been all that fond of the trade and I want to retire and start a bit of a small-holding place with glass for tomatoes whilst I've still got the energy to run it. And I'm not going to say that what I suggested in the Clarendon the other evening is necessarily my very last word. If you want a thing, an extra hundred is neither here or there, is it?"

Thinking it over Arthur took this to mean that if he boldly said "Six thousand, five hundred" and stuck to it Lumley would agree.

Once again he wrote the figures down on the piece of green blotting-paper . . . 6500 . . . then he put the magical pound sign in front of them . . . £6500.

It looked like an awful lot of money to Arthur Engleton.

Women were complete and utter b.f.'s, he thought irritably, and why they could ever be allowed any say in business or the handling of money he couldn't imagine. All Jean could do was to babble about security. As though a house were security. A house on which you had to pay rates and insurance and that had to be painted

and kept in repair. She couldn't see, apparently, that the very best security of all was money. With six thousand, five hundred pounds to your account in the bank you could afford to laugh at the world. The world didn't hurt people who could lay their hands on six and a half thousand pounds. It was fantastic that she couldn't see that. It suddenly occurred to him that Jean hadn't done anything about making a will. Suppose she had an accident; that very day in London; she might be standing at Hyde Park Corner and a bus could skid into her . . . *what would happen to Platts?*

After a moment or two of reflection his scare died away. He was no lawyer and didn't pretend to be; but he felt pretty certain that if there wasn't a will the next of kin would get everything.

. . . a bus could skid into her, these things happened, and Platts would be his. They would find out who she was and look for a telephone number and there wouldn't be one so presently there would be a ring at the front-door bell . . .

*Brrrr, brrrr.*

For an instant Arthur went cold with fright. As the very words formed in his brain . . . *so presently there would be a ring at the front-door bell* . . . the ring had in fact come.

*Brrrr, brrrr.*

He was able to laugh now. Coincidences happen. This was a coincidence. Nothing to it. But his laugh was a very shaky one.

He went out of the study, crossed the hall and opened the front door.

His first impression was of how small she was . . . not more than five foot one; slender; slight; but square-cut shoulders that looked oddly purposeful.

His second, the extravagant artificial bloneness of her hair, a deliberately unruly crop of near-white curls.

His third, her eyes.

Odd eyes; hard to place as to colour; very sure of themselves; lighted with a sort of fascinated scorn for men. Disdainful eyes; but hungry eyes.

She smiled at him; it was a smile which seemed to say that something had already happened to their relationship. Something had already been determined about it.

"I thought nobody was in," she said. "You were so long answering the bell."

"It startled me."

She couldn't be expected to understand why it should have startled him and he was glad she didn't ask.

"Are you Arthur Engleton?"

Not "Mr. Engleton" he noticed; he was already noticing everything about this woman.

"Yes, I'm Arthur Engleton."

"I'm Valerie Stockley."

For a moment the name didn't mean anything to him; then he remembered the name and address that Lumley had given him. And he just didn't believe it.

This couldn't be the part-time typist. Somehow he had formed an image in his mind of a dowdy fiftyish-looking, bespectacled ex-school-mistress type. He stared in astonishment.

She laughed. "You look as though you don't believe it."

"I—I didn't expect anybody like you."

"There isn't anybody else like me."

Arthur had to find words of some sort, about something, so he asked:

"Can you really type?"

*"Anything you can do*

*I can do better.*

*I can do anything better than you."*

It had been a phrase out of a catchy tune Arthur couldn't remember when. Five or six years ago. But as it happened he remembered the song and he remembered dancing to it. He was to learn that it was a great

favourite with Valerie; it was almost her signature tune. She had a perpetual hunger for men, yet she despised men. The catchy little phrase was her way of showing that she despised men. She believed it too. She believed that the man she chose to throw in her lot with could do anything—provided always that he would listen to her telling him how to do it.

“Hadn’t you better come inside?” Arthur asked, he moved back into the hall and Valerie Stockley stepped through the doorway into Platts.

She had hardly set foot in the house when a resounding crash made them both jump.

“Whatever was that?” she asked. “Somebody falling downstairs or something?”

“It can’t have been that; there’s nobody else in the house. Perhaps——”

Arthur left his sentence unfinished because he was completely at a loss to suggest what might have caused the noise; but investigation soon showed that a large ornamental mirror that hung on the back wall of the hall had fallen to the ground and was lying there, its glass broken and its frame badly cracked.

Valerie laughed. “It quite scared me for the moment,” she said. “Also, incidentally, it’s seven years’ bad luck for somebody, if you happen to be superstitious.”

Arthur moved the wreckage with his foot.

“The nail must have come out of the wall,” he said.

“Well, I suppose it had to happen sometime.”

“Did you say there’s nobody else in the house?”

“My wife’s up in London for the day.”

“What’s this work you want me to do?”

“We had better go into my study and talk about it.”

It was disturbing to see her there, curled like a cat in the arm-chair, watching him with amused, disdainful eyes, whilst he talked about the book he was writing.

“. . . the point is that a lot of the stuff which will go into the appendices, all the extracts from the Manor Rolls

for instance, will have to be carefully typed out. I've marked the passages in the books, but I don't want to have to do the typing. I couldn't do it well enough, I'm not a typist."

She didn't bother to say whether she thought she could tackle the job or not. "Is this what you make your living at, writing books like this?" she asked.

"Writing all sorts of books; and other things." He laughed. "I'm a writing animal."

"Do you make a lot of money?"

"This book ought to be worth a few hundred pounds."

"How long will it take you to write it?"

"All told six or seven months, I suppose."

"What's your wife doing in London?"

"Meeting a friend."

"Boy friend?"

Arthur felt nettled by the question, considering it an affront to his dignity.

"Jean doesn't have boy friends."

Valerie suddenly opened her eyes wide at him, a favourite trick of hers as he was to learn, and smiled.

"Has she got the money?" she asked.

The unexpectedness of the question took him by surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, a few hundred pounds for six or seven months' work doesn't sound very much to me. I was wondering how you manage to live in a house like this, that's all."

"Actually, the house is Jean's."

She laughed and shrugged her shoulders.

"Nice for her. Not so nice for you, perhaps. Can I see over it?"

"See over it? If you want to. Why?"

"Curiosity. I'm intensely curious. If I think a man is worth being curious about."

In the hall she surveyed the wreckage of the fallen mirror and said:

"I wonder why it fell down just when it did."

"Like I said, the nail supporting it had to give way sometime. Nothing goes on for ever."

"But just exactly as I came in through the door."

"Believe me, if you hadn't come in through the door at that precise moment it would have fallen just the same."

She laughed. "Show me the house."

The dining-room, the drawing-room, the unused lift which had to be explained, the kitchen——

"Isn't there a larder?" she asked.

"What on earth do you want to see the larder for?"

"I'm curious——"

Then up the stairs. At the top of the stairs just at the beginning of the corridor she stopped suddenly and looked about her.

"What's the matter?"

"It's cold here."

"Cold?"

"A funny sort of cold. Can't you feel it?"

"Damp probably. If you own a house there are always repairs of one sort or another."

There were five bedrooms, only two of them in use; a third was earmarked as the "spare room"; one was a box-room and one just unused.

In the main bedroom (now used only by Jean) she walked about examining with quick, feminine glances, pricing with derisive eyes the toilet things on the dressing-table, the photographs.

"Is this your wife?"

He thought he detected a sudden quickening of interest in her voice, but was at a loss to understand it.

"Yes. That's Jean."

She hummed the snatch of her tune; a hum that was meant to be irritating and provocative.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why should you think I mean anything just because I hum a tune?"



"You do. You mean something by every damned thing you do."

She laughed, delighted. "How clever of you to begin to appreciate me. I thought you said this Jean of yours hadn't got a boy friend."

"Well?"

"I suppose you don't go into Witherley much."

"What are you driving at?"

She seemed to have lost interest in the subject and looking round the room afresh asked:

"Do you sleep in here with your wife?"

"No. As a matter of fact I sleep in my dressing-room."

"Oh, it's like that is it?"

"It's like that."

"Everyone in Witherley has morning coffee or afternoon tea at The Willow Tree."

Arthur thought for a moment and then asked:

"Whom was Jean having coffee or tea with when you saw her in this Willow Tree place?"

She laughed. "Ah, you're clever. I like clever men. A young chap. A boy. Good-looking, I'd say he was in love with her."

When they were downstairs again Arthur asked:

"Are you going to do any work for me?"

The strange eyes opened wide.

"Of course. As much as you like."

"I haven't got it ready yet. Will you come up here again?"

"One day when you're on your own again. I don't like the house."

"I don't much."

"Are you going on living here?"

He considered for a moment whether he should tell her anything of the position and then decided against it. At any rate for the time being. He had a premonition even then that she would know all about him in time.

"Anything might happen," he said.

She looked steadily at him. "That's always true."

Suddenly she moved to him, and lifting her face, kissed him full on the lips, a hungry kiss of passion whose violence and promise of violence shook and disturbed him.

"You can always ring me," she said almost in a whisper. "Witherley 32."

He stood watching her go down the drive; he thought she would be humming to herself her pet tune:

*"I can do anything better than you."*

She didn't turn round to see whether he was watching her or not. She was just supremely confident that he was.

Behind him the house stood quiet and waiting.

## CHAPTER IX

"ARTHUR, COME in here a minute."

It was the morning after Jean's day in London with Ursula Hind and she was slightly later than usual in getting up and starting the day. She had not gone into the drawing-room before breakfast, and now that the meal was finished and Arthur was sitting on at the table over a cigarette and the *Daily Mail* she had crossed the hall into the drawing-room to open the window and make the room ready for the day.

What she saw as soon as she opened the door made her stare in astonishment. Every single article of furniture that could be moved was crowded down into one end of the room—the two arm-chairs, the sofa, the standard lamp, the occasional tables, all in an untidy jumble. It looked as though it had been done by someone in an angry hurry.

"What is it?" Arthur called out, his morning perusal of the paper was a rite which tended to get longer and longer every day and he hated it to be interrupted.

"Come in here a moment. There's something I want to show you."

Grumbling, Arthur came out of the dining-room and stood beside her in the doorway.

He stared for a moment uncomprehendingly and then asked in an aggrieved way:

"What on earth have you done all this for? Are you going to spring clean the room or something?"

"Don't be silly. I haven't done it."

"Well, *I* certainly didn't."

"I know you didn't. Neither of us did. It just *was* done."

"You're not going to tell me that you think this poltergeist nonsense really did this?"

"Well, you tell me who did do it then. Everything was in its right place when we went to bed last night."

Arthur moved a pace into the room and leant against the wall, drawing meditatively at his cigarette.

"I still don't believe it," he said at last.

Jean laughed. "Only because you don't want to."

"It must be a practical joke or something like that."

"Who played it on us?"

Her husband, still staring at the jumbled-up furniture, didn't reply.

"What I want to know," Jean went on, "is *why*." She laughed. "What were you up to whilst I was in London yesterday? Or perhaps it was that whoever it is still in the house didn't like my leaving it for the day."

"Of all the damned nonsense."

"No, it isn't damned nonsense, Arthur. The damned nonsensical part of it is to refuse to believe things that are happening just because they haven't happened

before; or because you don't like them; or you're scared of them."

"I couldn't possibly be less scared. I just don't believe it, that's all."

"You don't believe that at this moment all the drawing-room furniture is crowded together at one end of the room?"

"There's always an explanation of everything. You could have moved it yourself before calling me in to look at it."

"Why?"

"How the hell should I know why you do things?"

"Did anything happen in the house yesterday?"

"Yes. I worked hard all day."

"Did anybody come here?"

"Who would?"

"I thought perhaps a beggar or a tramp—somebody the house didn't like."

For a moment Arthur's mind was seized and shaken by a sudden reliving of that moment when he had opened the front door and seen that almost diminutive figure, that extravagantly pale hair, those strange, disturbing, laughing eyes.

"Nobody came," he said woodenly.

Jean laughed again. "I honestly think it must be because I went away for a day," she said.

"Which is just about the most fantastically silly thing I have ever heard you say."

"But is it silly?"

"Bloody silly."

"When things happen there must be an explanation, a reason."

"There could be half a dozen explanations. I've told you one."

Jean shrugged her shoulders. "That's just being pig-headed. I never believed in ghosts till we came here. I still think that ninety-nine out of every hundred so-called

ghost stories are made up, or imagined, or due to some other cause, rats scuttling about or a trick of light or something like that——”

“So is all the nonsense in this house.”

“No. There is something here, Arthur. Someone, I suppose it is. Haven’t you ever noticed just at the top of the stairs——”

“What about just at the top of the stairs?”

“There’s a—a feeling. There’s a spot there where it’s suddenly colder.”

Her husband was staring at her but not seeing her. He was seeing the other woman; the woman who hummed her snatch of tune; who laughed at him provokingly; who had got right under his skin . . .

“Haven’t you ever noticed that?”

“No.”

“Perhaps you just don’t notice these things.”

“I don’t. Perhaps you imagine them.”

She smiled and pointed wordlessly to the jumbled furniture.

“But if you *do* notice them,” her husband went on, “it’s all the more reason for getting out of the place. Let’s sell the house and get back to London.”

“No. Never.”

“Suppose I don’t like living in a place where there’s a haunt?”

“You can’t have it both ways, Arthur. If you don’t believe in a thing you can’t dislike it.”

“I still say sell the house.”

“I’m not going to sell Platts, ever. I think there is some sort of influence in the house; but I don’t mind it. I think it’s friendly. Whenever I go past that spot at the top of the stairs I say under my breath ‘If there is any unquiet spirit in this house may God give it rest and happiness.’”

“What absolute nonsense.”

Jean shook her head. “No. It isn’t nonsense. It’s

the right thing to say. I'm sure of it. And if you are at all scared——"

"Scared? What of?"

"Another world. Just behind us. All round us. Touching us. But we can't quite see it."

"The only world I know about is the one we are in. The one where you can do what you like if you've got enough money. Scared? I'll show you how scared I am"—he stood in the drawing-room doorway looking into the hall and raising his voice called out loudly: "If there is any unquiet spirit hanging about in this house get to hell out of it and leave the place alone."

The angry words died away and for a long thirty seconds there was an intense silence in the house.

"I wish you hadn't done that," Jean said quietly.

"Oh, to hell with it. You put the furniture back where you moved it from and I'll go and try to earn some money. If you won't sell the place I suppose I've got to make enough to pay for the upkeep of it."

Arthur didn't work easily that morning; nor did he work easily during the next four or five days. He was moody and irritable, but it was no new thing that he should be like this and Jean took no notice of it. She believed that he was working hard at his book and she knew that he kept a bottle of whisky in his study which he thought she didn't know about, so that she was reconciled to the fact that certainly until his book was finished he would be a very difficult man to live with. She gave herself up more and more to the house, gradually getting the old-fashioned and long-neglected furniture polished and in good condition again.

She put her husband's bad temper down to work and drink and did not know that he was in a strange mental turmoil.

After the first year of their marriage Arthur Engleton had never even pretended to be faithful to his wife. In fact he would have regarded the view that he ought



to be faithful as something unreasonable and even fantastic.

There had been, and Jean knew that there had been, a number of rather sordid little affairs from cramped furtivenesses in the backs of cars to lies about an odd night spent away from home. The hallmark of them all was their utter lack of meaning; even Arthur hadn't pretended that they meant anything and in her sadder assessments of the sort of mess their joint life had got into Jean was sometimes apt to think "Poor Arthur, he can't even have a proper affair."

Now something had happened to him which as yet Jean knew nothing about and which he himself could not understand.

"*This isn't love*" . . . a score of times he told himself that, sitting in his study when he should have been writing, and staring with unseeing eyes out on to the garden. No, he didn't think that he was in love with Valerie Stockley, the very coinage of the word had become debased with him so that it had ceased to mean much. He didn't admit that he was in love with her. But suddenly a word leapt into his mind which expressed exactly what he felt—*he was obsessed by her*. This was an obsession. Obsession; possession. Possessed of a devil. He laughed at his recollection of the phrase. Jean imagined that her house was possessed by something; and *his* house, the very essence and temple of him, was possessed too. But not by any imagined thing. By a woman with mocking, hungry eyes. By a woman who hummed at him:

*"I can do anything better than you."*

by a woman who said "You can always ring me; Witherley 32."

As he made that image of her in his mind the man

breathed uneasily and his heart raced a little as though he had been running.

All the quick snatches at physical sensation which had been his "affairs" up-to-date were completely nothing compared to this. He didn't even know that he wanted this woman physically.

Or so he told himself. He was obsessed by her. The need to see her, to be near her, was eating away inside him, destroying any peace and any other purpose he might have had. Possessed of a devil, he thought; possessed of a woman. And he laughed. He liked it so.

He thought *this woman is my destiny*. And when he tried to laugh at himself for such a romantic notion he couldn't, knowing that whatever the feeling was that had him in its grip it was no mere romance and was stronger than any notion.

"What's that tune you keep humming?" Jean asked him one day.

"I didn't know I was humming."

"Isn't it that thing:

*"Anything you can do  
I can do better,  
I can do anything better than you"*

Arthur shrugged his shoulders. "I haven't the faintest idea; it was just something running in my head."

He had made no effort to get in touch with Valerie Stockley again, being quite certain that an obvious opportunity would present itself before long. In his heart he knew that when the opportunity came he would seize it, but the fact that he had not yet taken any step in the matter gave him an illusion of still possessing freedom which he treasured.

He thought a good deal over Valerie's story of having seen Jean in a Witherley café with some young fellow.

It was just possible that she was mistaken, of course; but he didn't think so.

He didn't think that she was the sort of woman to make mistakes; on the other hand he didn't really believe that Jean was conducting a secret love affair. He found himself hoping that she was. If he could surprise her in something of that sort it might be much easier to deal with her over other matters, including the house.

And in any case it wouldn't suit him to spring the trap just yet . . .

"Who was the man you were having tea with in the Willow Café the other day?"

"What makes you think I was having tea there with any man?"

"Somebody saw you and told me."

"Who?"

At the moment that "who" would have been an awkward question for he had said nothing about Valerie Stockley's visit to the house.

But the fact that he couldn't spring his trap all at once didn't worry Arthur in the slightest; he enjoyed waiting and watching, biding his time.

Three weeks after her first visit to see Ursula Hind, Jean got a second letter from her. A long, enthusiastic letter, the relevant parts of which she read out at the breakfast table.

"Ursula's thinking of running a hat shop in Paddington. She's got a chance of buying one that's already established there and she wants to know if I'll go in with her as a partner."

"And will you?"

"How could I? You can't run a hat shop in Paddington from down here."

"We could go and live in London."

"I'm not giving up Platts for a very chancy partnership of a small hat shop in Paddington, but I'll go up and have

a look at the place and see what it's like. Ursula asks me to do that and I should enjoy it."

"When will you go?"

Jean thought for a moment, balancing housewifely problems and purchases in her head.

"I *could* go to-morrow—if you wouldn't mind?"

"I don't mind. Stay the night if you like."

"No, I won't do that. I don't like to stay away from Platts. Goodness knows how angry the house would get if I did that."

Arthur shrugged his shoulders. "That nonsense."

"You wouldn't like to come up to Town for a day with me, Arthur, I suppose?"

The man was surprised and for a moment alarmed lest his excuse for staying behind might sound thin and be seen through.

"I wouldn't mind a day in Town," he said speaking slowly, "in fact I should like it. But I couldn't possibly spare the time at present, I'm working far too hard on this book."

"Oh, well," Jean smiled. "I just thought there was a chance you might."

Arthur watched her. He couldn't tell whether her smile was one of relief or not. He wondered about the young man in The Willow Tree Café. Would Jean really be clever enough to ask him to go up to Town with her, knowing that he was not likely to say yes, in order to prevent his becoming suspicious?

"By the way, talking about your book," she said, "have you got hold of anybody to do the typing you want done?"

"Not yet."

"Didn't that Mr. Lumley give you the name of somebody. I thought you said that was what he came up here for that day."

"So it was. Yes, he gave me the name and address of someone who might do; but I haven't contacted her yet."

## CHAPTER X

ARTHUR WALKED with Jean to the bus stop to see her on to the bus. Privately she was astonished that he should do so; he had never been good at the minor courtesies and for a long time had neglected them altogether.

He thought that he had perhaps made a mistake in going with her; it wasn't the sort of thing he normally did and she might read into it an anxiety to see her go. He knew he was right when her words almost exactly echoed his thoughts.

"You must be anxious to get rid of me, Arthur."

She was laughing: but there the words were, spoken, and, however much laughter there might be, at least the ghost of a thought was behind them.

"I am," he declared, "I want to get back to my book."

"Don't forget to switch the oven on at twelve o'clock."

"Here's the bus."

"And I'll be back at half-past six."

Arthur nodded. He knew all about the times of the late afternoon trains and buses back having studied them carefully. The trains weren't good and the combination of trains and buses was farcical so that if you lived at Platts and hadn't got a car you had to come back from London by the 3.3 and catch the afternoon bus out, or wait until the 5.33 and the early evening bus.

He was free, therefore, until just after half-past six.

"There's something to be said for living in a god-forsaken hole like this," he thought with amusement, watching the squat green back of the bus as it rounded the bend of the lane and disappeared from sight.

When it had vanished he did not turn back to Platts but, feeling in his pocket to make sure that he had the

necessary four pennies, he walked along the lane to the first cross-roads where the red telephone kiosk stood.

On his way to the kiosk he thought "*Somebody will be using it and I shan't be able to get in,*" but he didn't really think it would be like that; something inside him told him that it would never be difficult for him to reach Valerie Stockley.

As he walked up to it a woman finished speaking on the telephone, replaced the instrument and came out. She smiled at him.

"Just in time for you," she said. "Lucky, aren't you? I stay in there for ages once I get started."

He didn't know who she was and he didn't care. He had a hazy impression that she was good-looking in a bold, attractive sort of way, but he was indifferent.

He had a hunger on him that went a lot deeper than that and as he pulled open the heavy door of the kiosk and went inside he was shaking with the intensity of feeling that gripped him.

Of his four pennies one was a worn Victorian coin; it didn't lodge in the machine but came tinkling out again at once. For the moment he was in a panic. To have had to go back to the house for the necessary fourth coin and then out again would have been too frustrating.

He fished the light-weight penny out of the little metal receptacle and tried it again.

This time it lodged safely and after a few seconds the exchange asked him what number he wanted.

"Witherley 32."

It was the first time he had said it aloud. He had said it often enough in his head, but this was the first time he had spoken the words aloud.

He heard the bell ringing at the other end and he thought, in sudden alarm, *she'll be out, she won't be there.* But he didn't really believe it. She had to be there. He was sure of it. "*This woman is my destiny,*" he thought.

"Hallo."



The voice sounded sleepy as though she was not properly awake yet.

"Is that Mrs. Stockley?"

A fractionally slight pause, then, "Arthur Engleton?"

"I was wondering if you could come out to Platts and look at some of that work to-day."

The slight pause again, then:

"Why to-day?"

"I've got some of it ready and my wife's up in London for the day."

The still-sleepy voice sounded amused.

"I see. What time is she coming back?"

"Not until half-past six. She'll catch the bus at the station, and it doesn't get here till six-thirty something."

"How very convenient for you."

"Are you coming over here, Valerie?"

"I'm not even up yet."

"Is the telephone by your bed?"

"Of course. You don't imagine I'd be standing out in the cold answering it, do you. You woke me up."

"I'm glad. What time can you come?"

"Have you really got any work for me to do?"

"Yes, if you want it."

"Of course I want it, Arthur. I want to earn some money. I'm very hard up. Didn't you realise that?"

He was alarmed by the sudden sharpness in her voice.

"Well, come over then and we'll see what we can do," he said.

"I may not be able to to-day."

"Jean will be away all day till half-past six."

"What time do you want me to come?"

"It doesn't matter; when it suits you."

"I may not be able to come at all."

"Just any time that suits you."

She rang off. No "good-bye"; no "nice of you to have called"; nothing except the sudden termination of their conversation. He stared at the dead instrument

undecided between anger and alarm. He was a hot-tempered man and over quick to resent anything in the way of even an imagined rudeness; but now also he was a hungry man; never before had he wanted anyone as badly as he wanted this woman. He felt the need for her working in him like a fever; like a drying, searing fever.

Walking slowly away from the telephone kiosk he went over their conversation in his head . . . twice she had said "*I may not be able*" on the other hand she had asked "*What time do you want me to come?*" and she had asked, too, about the work, "*Have you really got any work for me?*" and then she had spoken about her need for money. "*I'm very hard up, didn't you realise that?*" She had said that almost angrily so that he had been terrified that she was going to fly off in a temper. *Had* she flown off in a temper? Was that the explanation of the abrupt way she rang off at the end?

When he got back to Platts he found that the postman had called whilst he had been telephoning. There were three letters and a parcel. Two of the letters were bills, one of them an account rendered with a peremptory "immediate settlement would oblige" tag attached; the third was a circular soliciting money to provide homes and holidays for old ladies somewhere or other. He tore it up savagely. To hell with the old ladies, he thought. Nobody dreamed of providing any money for overworked and unsuccessful writers. Any money that he made—and a great deal more—he needed for himself.

He undid the parcel and found that it contained four books and a letter.

The books were for review which was cheering. He would get three guineas possibly for reviewing them and could then sell them at half-price in Chancery Lane. He glanced quickly at the prices on the inside flaps. Fifteen shillings; sixteen shillings; fifteen shillings; twenty-five shillings. At a rough guess that looked like about thirty-five bob for him.

He looked at P.V.'s letter which unexpectedly turned out to be something more than the usual note saying, "Herewith four books for review. About eight hundred words. In a week if possible."

It said that—or the equivalent—but there was more to it as well. He settled down to read it a second time, frowning.

"Damn P.V.'s blasted cheek," he said when he came to the end of the letter.

It was a typical P.V. letter . . . did he want the paper to go on sending him books for review or would he like a rest from it for a while. Probably he had had a very busy time settling into a new house and this would understandably account for a certain staleness which some people had seemed to detect in his writing lately . . .

"Damn his blasted cheek," Arthur said again, but there was a sudden coldness inside him. This was how disaster came to you if you were a writer; this was how they told you you were beginning to be washed up; it wasn't the brutal "take your cards and get out" of the factory; it got wrapped up a bit; but there it was; "*a certain staleness*" i.e. your work's no bloody good any longer; "would you like a rest?" i.e. if you can't pull your socks up you're going to get the sack.

He read the letter again a third time and then tore it up slowly and methodically. It had taken the gilt off the gingerbread all right. Not much good getting four books for review if this sort of letter came with them. Especially when you knew, deep inside yourself, that there was something in it.

Something in it. But it was only half true. In justice to himself it was only half true. "*A certain staleness.*" Who the hell wouldn't show a certain staleness writing as he had had to write any time during the last five years?

Damned whey-faced, shrew-hearted landladies screaming for rent; lying in wait for you in the hall; pouncing.

Every tradesman you dealt with badgering you for the

two pounds ten or whatever it was you happened to owe him; and the paper full each morning of television and cinema stars who had been owing the Inland Revenue people thousands for years.

Read four books, write eight hundred words about them and pick up three guineas; perhaps only two and a half if that smug bastard P.V. detects a certain staleness in your article. It worked out at about seven and six an hour. What the hell did they expect for seven and six, he wondered savagely, coruscating liveliness? Scintillating brilliance?

He bent down, fished the torn bits of P.V.'s letter out of the waste-paper basket and, fitting them roughly together, read it again.

Then he crossed the room and mixed himself a whisky and soda. It was unusual for him to have a drink so early. But he wanted it. "*God*" he thought, "*that's good.*" He had mixed it just right. Not too strong. The tang of the spirit and the warmth of it gave him confidence . . . "Maybe it's just P.V. in a bad mood," he thought, "something he dictated in a hurry; maybe there's really nothing in it."

P.V. had dictated it to a secretary. A twenty-year-old, straight from Mrs. Somebody's Training College, full of diplomas and God knows what, little creature. Ever so sure of herself and pleased with life. Well, P.V. could have her and a score like her. At this precise moment, he thought, is P.V. sitting, shaking, his eyes shut, a fever on him, his spirit in dry and barren places wondering whether a woman is coming to see him, a woman with mocking eyes, humming her insolent tune, a woman who lay in bed telephoning to you and who suddenly put down the receiver, cut you off, left you in the air?

He picked up the four review books and made a preliminary examination of them. No good trying to work on his own book to-day. P.V. would be wanting his article, "within a week if possible," cracking the

whip already for his seven-and-six-an-hour article. Or did they expect him to write his own book and do the reviewing on top of it?

The books didn't look very stimulating. Ordinary stuff. Written, he was afraid he would find, with "a certain staleness." Not out and out bad stuff, just ordinary, mediocre. And the most difficult thing in the world was to write a lively review about a dull book.

"I have become a writing animal," he thought bitterly and on a sudden his head jerked up. He thought he had heard footsteps on the gravel of the drive. But his head came down again slowly. There had been no footsteps. She hadn't come. Maybe she *wouldn't* come. He took another mouthful of his lonely drink and swallowed it slowly. Maybe she wouldn't come. He faced the thought, whisky-fortified. O.K. maybe she wouldn't. He still didn't envy P.V. his skirt-and-blouse, clickety-clack, know-it-all, know-not-one-damned-thing, ten-pounds-a-week, share-a-flat-with-two-other-girls, isn't-it-marvellous-I've-got-a-boy-friend-in-the-Brigade, well-educated (i.e. entirely ignorant about nine-tenths of life) piece of mechanical efficiency.

Even if Valerie Stockley didn't come, and he was convinced now that she wouldn't, even if she didn't, he was in thrall to her.

When you shut your eyes and your mind is invaded by a vision and your hands shake and your throat goes dry because of that vision then you are in thrall and glad of it.

"*La belle dame sans merci* hath me in thrall," he thought. Was she *sans merci*? He could believe it and didn't care. Rather welcomed it, in fact. In the afternoon, well before Jean got back, about five o'clock maybe he would go out to the telephone kiosk and telephone her again.

He made up his mind which of the four books he intended to read first and to make the main part of his article and settled down to read it, a pencil in his hand,



a sheet of paper on the desk for any notes he might want to make.

He read avidly and quickly, with intense concentration, laying violent hold of the printed pages with his mind and trying to tear the heart out of them. Aware that time was against him; that he must miss nothing; on the look-out continually for a quotable passage, for an inconsistency, for any peg on which to hang his review.

Occasionally he laid down his pencil, stretched out to the glass that stood on his desk and took a drink and when the first whisky and soda was finished he got up and mixed another one.

By a quarter to one he had virtually read the book. He leaned back and put his fingertips for a second to his closed eyes. He was hardly himself for the moment. He knew this painful feeling well, akin to that which a man feels physically moving suddenly out of one atmosphere into an entirely different one. For three hours he had been in a world of somebody else's creating, living in it, making himself acquainted with its inhabitants, believing in it, for the moment, as the only world.

Now, at the flick of the last page, he was back in his own world looking on that imaginary one from the outside and his brain was already beginning to stir with the preliminary phrases that he must string together about it.

By half-past one he had sketched out in pencil most of what he intended to say. It would have to be revised later; knocked into shape; polished; in case, he thought with sudden anger, it should smack of a certain staleness.

He remembered that Jean had said something about a cold lunch being put all ready in the larder and he went in to get it unenthusiastically. He wasn't particularly hungry. And the sight of thin slices of tinned meat didn't improve his appetite.

He took the tray just as it was into the dining-room and mixed himself another drink to go with it.



When he had finished eating he pulled a pencil out of his pocket and sat on, working at the crossword in the daily paper. He didn't particularly care whether he did it or not, but it was something to occupy his mind and not for the life of him could he have begun to read another book for an hour or so. So he puzzled over the artificial inanities of clues which when solved mattered not at all and about which he couldn't have cared less.

When the door bell rang he was, for a moment, completely taken by surprise.

He glanced at the clock. Two o'clock. Even if she came at all it wouldn't be at two. Of that he felt sure.

When he opened the front door she was there—just exactly as she had been the first time, a half-smile pulling at the small shapely mouth, a half-sneer lurking in the strange tawny eyes.

"You look surprised," she said, "didn't you expect me?"

"I didn't know whether you were coming or not."

"Of course, I was always coming."

"I didn't expect it would be now, at two——"

"Don't expect me to do the expected. Don't I get asked in?"

Arthur stood back and made a gesture. As the woman stepped over the threshold the bell rang again, loudly.

"Why did you do that?" he asked.

"I didn't."

"You must have pressed the bell as you came in."

"I didn't touch the bell."

They stood in the hall looking at one another in a suddenly very silent house.

When at last she spoke the woman said:

"There's something funny about this house, isn't there?"

"Funny?"

"Well, the first time as I came in that mirror fell down——"

"That was nothing. It had to fall sometime."

"And now the bell. Did that have to ring sometime, then?"

Arthur shrugged his shoulders.

"Besides there are rumours about it."

"What sort of rumours?"

"Oh, talk about ghosts. The usual sort of thing."

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

"Yes."

"You do?"

"Of course. But I'm not scared of them. Nothing can hurt you when you're warm and living."

Arthur smiled. "I'm not scared either." He raised his voice and called out: "If there is any unquiet spirit playing the fool in this house get to hell out of it, that's what I say."

The woman laughed approvingly. "I like that. That's exactly how I feel." She raised her voice as he had done and called up into the silent and listening house. "If there is any unquiet spirit fooling about here get to hell out of it and leave us to enjoy ourselves."

When her words had died away in silence Arthur asked: "Is that what we are going to do, enjoy ourselves?"

She stood at the bottom of the stairs one foot on the first step. She looked at him over her shoulder with those disturbing yet compelling eyes. When she spoke it was in a whisper.

"Of course we are," she said. "Or are you afraid of ghosts, or of anything else?"

The man shook his head and she smiled, half in satisfaction half in derision it seemed, and began lightly and quickly to go upstairs.

At the top she turned and put her hand on his arm. When she spoke it was in a passionate, urgent whisper.

"Take me out of this cold patch. Into your dressing-room. Quickly."

They made love with hungry violence and the man

was almost frightened by the intensity of her passion and by the silence in which it was consummated.

Afterwards she walked round the room examining all his possessions, looking at photographs, asking questions.

She came back to the bed where he was still lying watching her and demanded a cigarette.

"It isn't only your room any longer," she said. "I've been here."

He nodded, astonished at the closeness of her words to his own thought for he had been thinking, watching her pick up his toilet things, examine them and put them down again, he had been thinking "there'll always be something of her in this room now; she's part of it in a way."

He smiled. "There'll be a ghost of you here."

"If you want the house really haunted I'll do it for you. I'm good at haunting."

"I know you are."

She sat on the end of the bed drawing at her cigarette.

"You know it?"

"You have haunted me since I first saw you. I've been obsessed by you."

"Obsessed? Tell me?"

"Damn it woman, I *have* told you. Or don't you understand what words mean? I've been obsessed by you. Stopped from working and almost driven out of my mind. Does that please you enough?"

She slanted her eyes at him.

"Have you been working to-day, this morning, until I came?"

"Of course, I have. How do you think I live?"

"I don't know how you live. I want to find out. What have you been working at, the book you are writing?"

"No. Not that."

"What then? Something you like better?"

"Like better? God in heaven, no. How would you like to have to read four stupid pieces of other people's

mediocrity when you ought to be doing your own work? Fill your brain with the world of another man's imagining; know all about it; get inside his plot; assess his style; tear the guts out of the thing. Then wipe it clean out of your mind and start all over again with something else. Four times running."

"What do you do that for? Reviewing?"

"What else would you imagine I do it for?"

"It must be tiring."

He laughed suddenly, lying there, naked, on the bed.

"It's like making love to you, exhausting."

She shook her head. "No, no. Not like making love. After making love to me you'll write all the better."

"Could be."

"You'll see."

"Could be. I——"

She watched him steadily. When you are invading a new country conquering it foot by foot you must watch everything most carefully. You can afford to neglect no detail, for every detail may be of use to you.

Why had he started to say something and then let his voice trail away?

"You what?" she prompted gently.

"I dreamed a dream."

She waited for more, but no more came so she shook her head violently.

"No use to me, dreams. I don't want dreams. I want acts, things done. When you take me into a room I want to hear people saying: 'See the man she's with? he did this or the other; wrote so-and-so.'"

"That's how I used to think. That people would say, 'That's the man who wrote such and such a book.' That *was* my dream."

"Why hasn't it been like that?"

There was always a risk that he might be thirsty during the night and to guard against it he kept—unknown, as he incorrectly thought, to anybody else—a glass, a bottle

and a siphon hidden in the bottom part of his wardrobe at the back of his shelf of shoes.

He went to it now and mixed himself a strong whisky and soda. It tasted delicious; one of the best drinks he had ever had.

"*Why hadn't it been like that?*" Turning the question over in his mind he didn't know. He honestly didn't know. With the satisfaction of acquitted manhood a delightful lazy glow all over him and with the spirit warming inside him he felt supremely good . . . why hadn't it been like that?

What had stopped him from grasping the golden apple? What even now could stop him from grasping it? If only he could get organised; not if he did more work but if what he did was made of better avail; if he was properly presented to the world; if he had some capital, something to start with; if he wasn't pushing uphill all the time so that he never had any momentum, could never freelance——

"You need somebody to organise you."

"My God, you keep saying things just as I'm thinking them."

"Naturally."

"Why naturally? Why do you say that?"

"I'm your haunt, didn't I tell you?"

"I wouldn't joke too much about it; this house is quite capable of throwing things at you."

"I'll risk it:

*"Anything you can do*

*I can do better*

*I can do anything better than you."*

she hummed, perhaps at him perhaps at the house.

He laughed. "You're a devil."

"That's why I'm not afraid of your haunt in the house."

"You're quite right, I need organising."

"That shouldn't be too difficult——"

"Then on him too, some secret night in spring,  
came the old frenzy of a thousand fools;  
the old want dark and deep  
to make some thing——"

"What's that?"

"Four lines of poetry written by a poet. Or haven't you heard of poetry? Is it true that there isn't a god-damned woman living who ever thinks of anything but fornication and fur coats?"

She waited, saying nothing. She had to be careful with this man. She would drive him once she got the whip into her hands. But at present it was *softlee, softlee, catchee monkey*. . . .

"Sorry," Arthur said, taking a swig at his drink. "God, this tastes good. After making love to you it tastes doubly good. I've wanted to do something, make something. It's inside every writer that urge, to make something, dream it up out of nothing, his new little world with people in it alive and kicking—it's like being God. I could do it, too. Could have done once. Don't ask me what happened. What happened is life. Living. The necessity of it. Bills. No money. Shifting about. The world full of bloody fools you were at school with commuting up to London every day in their striped trousers and making piles on the Stock Exchange. And people telling you to read four books and write good reviews of them all, no staleness about it Smith Minor—bloody lucky to get seven and six an hour for doing it.

"And I suppose *this*——" he held up his tumbler, looked at it in desperation and affection and then slowly drained what was left in it, "but then, Christ, a man has got to have something to live on."



The woman reached out, took the glass from his hand and said: "Would you like another one?"

He nodded. "Thank God somebody understands me."

She fished about among his shoes at the bottom of the wardrobe, and to watch her doing it gave him a peculiar sense of satisfaction, of already being owned by her in some way.

When she handed it back to him she said:

"All you want is some money?"

"All!" When he had swallowed his first mouthful of his drink he added: "As a matter of fact, I could have it. Quite a lot of it. At least we could——"

"We?"

"Not us. Not you and I. Jean and I could."

"I'm not interested in that 'we.' Not now. Not any more."

"Well——"

"Tell me about the money. Has she got any, your wife?—but before you start telling me light a cigarette and give it me—put it between my lips."

He reached out to his case on the bedside table, took a cigarette, lit it, drew twice on it not so much to ensure that it was alight as to impress his own personality on it and then held it up for her powerful, sensual lips to grasp.

She smiled. "Good. Now tell me."

He told her about Jean's Aunt Au and the house and the thousand pounds.

She listened carefully, noting and considering everything.

"So *that's* how you came into the house," she said quietly. "And how much have you got?"

"Nothing. Not a damned cent. As fast as I've made anything I've had to spend it. I've never caught up with myself."

"Make more."

"Yes, yes. Make more. At seven and sixpence an hour. Read forty books in a day instead of four."

"You're a damned fool to work for seven and sixpence an hour."

"Probably, probably."

"I wouldn't let you do it."

He was silent; he thought it was quite possible that she wouldn't let him do it. She might supply the cutting edge that he lacked.

"And what's this about being able to get quite a lot of money?" she asked.

"The man who gave me your name and address——"

"Lumley?"

"Yes. The builder——"

The woman, sitting on the end of the bed, naked, watched him with eyes screwed up against the smoke of the cigarette dangling from her full red lips.

"What about him?"

"I met him in the local, the Clarendon, the other day. He's thinking of retiring from the building trade and he wants a place with a bit of garden where he could grow tomatoes. If I'd sell he'd give me six thousand five hundred, he has said so definitely."

"Lumley has made you a definite offer of six thousand five hundred?"

He nodded.

"And he told you he wants to retire and grow tomatoes?"

"He'd be doing it commercially, of course."

The woman laughed, threw her head back to watch a smoke ring float up towards the ceiling and, when it had dissolved into nothing said contemptuously:

"You must be a bloody fool. No wonder you've never made any money."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't really think that Maurice Lumley wants to retire from the building trade, do you?"

"He said he did."

"And grow tomatoes?"

"I don't see why he should make it up."

"You must be a simpleton."

"And you know everything and are going to tell me exactly what it's all about and what to do, is that it?"

She laughed. "More or less."

*"Anything you can do  
I can do better  
I can do anything better than you."*

"I used to dance to that tune."

"Maurice Lumley very nearly had you dancing to a fine tune I can tell you—tomatoes!"

"A lot of people do retire and start up concerns like that."

"Not Maurice Lumley. He's making more money than anybody else in Witherley and for miles round. And he intends to make more. He has said so publicly. Any piece of land no matter where it is, how big or how small, that comes into the market, Lumley has a look at it and if he thinks he can make a profit out of it he's after it like a shot. He won't retire till he falls down dead with a stroke."

Arthur considered this in silence for a moment or so and then asked:

"And what about the tomatoes?"

"If Lumley wants this place it isn't in order to grow tomatoes. Most likely he has found out that he can get a permit to build here and he wants to develop the place. Either turn the house into three or four flats or pull it down and put up an estate."

"You really think that's likely?"

"I know Maurice Lumley. I worked with him for quite a bit and I know him."

"And you think he'd be willing to give six thousand five hundred, for Platts?"

"Is that what he told you?"

"The second time we spoke about it. He came up here to have a look round. The first time he talked about six thousand."

"You can be pretty certain he would be prepared to go up to eight, then, if you stick out for it."

"Eight thousand pounds?"

"It's quite a lot of money, isn't it?" She slipped off the bed, stubbed her cigarette out on an ash-tray on the dressing-table and bent over the little pile of her clothes which as she undressed she had let slip on to the floor.

"I'm going," she said. "Hadn't you better get dressed too?"

When they were both dressed she took a quick look round the room. "Don't forget to clear out the ash-tray; and don't let Lumley fool you any more about tomatoes. Or the price. Stick out for eight thousand. We could do quite a lot on eight thousand."

They walked along the short length of corridor together and suddenly the woman stopped and lifted her face.

"Kiss me, Arthur," she whispered.

He turned abruptly towards her so that she was forced to step sideways a pace.

"*Look out!*"

He realised the danger, called his horrified warning and shot out a hand to grab her simultaneously. And only just in time. Had he acted two seconds later she must have fallen down the lift shaft behind her.

Now, white with sudden fear and trembling a little, she stood still clutching his saving arm and looking down the shaft.

"What a damn' fool thing to leave the gate open," she said shakily.

Arthur was examining the lift gate and its fastenings.

"It never is open," he said, "it hasn't been open since we came here. We never use the thing."

The woman was recovering her poise. She laughed a little.

"Well, it's open now," she said. "You gave me quite a fright, Arthur. What a very neat way of getting rid of anybody you didn't want."

## CHAPTER XI

ARTHUR'S ULTIMATE objective was Number Fifteen Bloomsbury Square, the offices of Andrews and Hoyle, publishers, who, if they didn't have the largest list in London, certainly had one of the most paying.

A & H on the spine of any book, neatly worked into the well-known monogram, had come to be recognised as the sign of something worth reading.

The first five chapters of Arthur's book, having been typed by Valerie Stockley, had been duly sent off.

Arthur always affected not to be interested in other people's opinions of what he wrote but, in fact, like every author he was intensely egotistical and hence extremely sensitive to any sort of criticism. So when he asked Valerie Stockley "What do you think of it?" the exaggerated casualness of his tone was no guide to his true feeling. But here he was perfectly safe. Like many women who are extremely shrewd and level-headed judges of life, Valerie had no standards by which to judge writing. She was out of her depth. It did quite honestly seem almost miraculous to her that a man could put so many words together; so that when she answered Arthur's query by saying "I think it's perfectly marvellous," she wasn't being consciously dishonest. She *did* think it was marvellous. She thought that the business of being an author was marvellous in itself. She thought that in Arthur she had at length got hold of a man

possessed of essential talent who in all other things could be moulded and directed just as she desired.

"I think it's perfectly marvellous," she said. She knew as she said it that she was flattering an already overweening vanity but for the moment she wasn't worried about that. Once Arthur was launched successfully in his own particular line and once her fortunes were linked with his she could cut him down to size easily enough. She was quite confident on that score.

"What do you think of it?" Arthur put the query to Jean, being careful to say nothing about Valerie Stockley's opinion.

"You must give me time to read it properly first."

"Which means that you don't like it."

"Arthur, don't be so silly and so touchy. It doesn't mean anything of the sort. I must have time to think it over and form a proper opinion."

But, of course, as far as Arthur was concerned the damage was done. When the fond mother asks "isn't he beautiful?" the slightest delay in replying "quite the most beautiful baby I have ever seen" is taken as damning criticism of the worst kind.

Jean's difficulty was not that she didn't know pretty well all there was to know about the foibles and weaknesses of the man she was married to, but that she honestly couldn't make up her mind about what he had written.

She desperately wanted this book to be a success. If it was then, surely, Arthur would begin to feel that the country, and Platts in particular, was a good environment for him to work in and would be more inclined to settle down there. And there were other considerations.

During the last few weeks Arthur himself had more than once said, "If I don't pull it off this time I never will," and, although Jean knew that when a man is writing too much importance mustn't be attached to his moods, either optimistic or otherwise, yet in this instance



she had a strong feeling that what Arthur said was very probably right. Every life has crises in it and she had an instinct that this book was just such a watershed of events in Arthur's life and in hers with him.

That the man she was married to was clever she had never had any doubt. Sometimes, looking at him with a background of other people behind him, in a tube train perhaps or, more likely, standing in a crowded bar, she would reflect wonderingly on what it was that made one man "cleverer" than perhaps eighty per cent of his fellows. It boiled down, she supposed, to some entirely physical thing; perhaps to one additional whorl (total length half a centimetre) of pulpy grey matter inside the helmet of his skull.

Whatever it was, and based on whatever slender grounds, she knew that Arthur possessed this extra "cleverness." He had a quick brain, it went to the middle of anything he was reading and it supplied a reaction. He had the knack of putting words together to express his thoughts. And often enough putting them together in a sardonically amusing and thought-provoking way.

But about the five typewritten chapters which he submitted to her now, demanding her opinion, Jean could not make up her mind.

She thought that there was good stuff in them but somehow they failed to grip her. They weren't compelling. They didn't make her particularly keen to go on.

How to put this across to Arthur, she wondered, and in any case was it wise to try to put it across? She could easily be wrong, after all. And she knew his temperament only too well. At an adverse criticism he was quite capable of throwing the whole project up and saying "If you don't believe in it what's the good of going on."

"I think it's all right," she said trying to speak judicially. "I think you've got it."

"You don't sound exactly enthusiastic."

"I think this is one of those books, Arthur, where it's frightfully hard to come to a real opinion until you've seen the whole thing."

"Still you wouldn't describe these first five chapters as definitely bad?"

"Don't be silly. Of course not."

"Let's hope Vincent Andrews feels a bit keener about it than you do."

"It's awfully well typed. Was it done by the part-time person you've got hold of?"

Arthur nodded . . . "got hold of" what an exact phrase, he thought. How perfectly right. Only it's the other way round. I haven't got hold of her. She has got hold of me. I'm possessed by her. . . .

"What's her name?"

"Valerie Stockley."

"What sort of a person is she?"

"Oh, ordinary" . . . what a fantastic mis-statement, he thought, the small figure, the spectacular hair, the dangerous eyes, making vivid and disturbing images on his brain—of all things in the world *ordinary* is the one she isn't.

"Young? Old?"

"Good God, I don't know. What is this, a passport identification parade or something? Lumley found her for me and she types the stuff I've written; and that's all I know about her."

"All right, Arthur, all right."

Looking back on that small scene a week later as he made his way in the bright London sunshine towards Bloomsbury Square, Arthur realised that it had been a mistake to show his annoyance. So far in his married life he hadn't troubled particularly to keep his peccadilloes hidden; but this was different. He knew that he mustn't let Jean and Valerie cross one another.

The letter from Vincent Andrews had been—just what

the hell *had* it been, he wondered, turning it over in his mind anew. Had it been encouraging or not?

“Dear Mr. Engleton,

“I have been interested to read the five chapters you sent me of your projected book; if you could conveniently call here at twelve o'clock next Thursday we might have a word about them.”

Lucian Hoyle, V.A.'s partner, looking at the letter before it was sent out said: “Why don't you just return the stuff and say sorry it isn't what we want?”

“I couldn't do that.”

“But it's true, isn't it? It's what you feel——”

“Oh, yes, it's what I feel all right; but——”

“Well, then, it's kinder that way. If you send this letter he'll probably think we are going to take the stuff.”

V.A. drew the letter towards him and reread it.

“You can hardly call it enthusiastic.”

“You say ‘I have been most interested——’”

“I'll cut out ‘most.’ ‘I have been interested’—how's that?”

Lucian shrugged his shoulders. “As you like. *Were* you interested?”

“To read it. To see what it was like. Yes. But what I feel is you can't just turn this chap down through the post, by letter. I know a bit about him.”

“A bit about Arthur Engleton? Which of us doesn't?”

“He's got talent.”

“He's had talent.”

“Some of the stuff he has done has been good.”

“The point is: is *this* good?”

“No. But I'm going to tell him so in person. Let him down lightly. Talk it over with him. It might be possible—I don't know.”

“Vincent, you don't honestly think this stuff”—young Hoyle tapped the typescript lying in front of him—“you

don't honestly believe that this can be made into anything, do you? "

V.A. shook his head unhappily. "No, I don't. I'm afraid it can't. There's something, well something gone out of the chap's writing somehow . . ."

Was it an encouraging letter or not? Arthur wondered making his way towards Bloomsbury Square. "*I have been interested*" . . . It didn't amount to much. Not even "greatly interested" or "most interested."

On the other hand if he hadn't liked it why bother to write at all? Why not just send it straight back with the usual polite letter of refusal and bloody circumlocution . . . "Most talented, no doubt, but not quite what we want at the moment"—"we feel that, of undoubted merit though your story is, the public taste, just at the moment, is tending to veer away from . . ." He knew all the stock phrases by heart and could very easily make up those he didn't know already.

Why would V.A. fix an interview if he hadn't got something to say about it?

The most likely solution was that the old basket liked the stuff well enough and had already made up his mind to tell Arthur to go ahead with the rest of the book but he wasn't going to say so without first of all insisting on some trifling amendments suggested by himself. Wouldn't do to let these authors get too good an opinion of themselves.

Bloomsbury was an old stamping-ground of Arthur's. Its side streets; its dingy little shops where all sorts of unexpected things could be bought; its shabby boarding houses and private hotels, its street corner pubs were all familiar to him.

His most direct route would have taken him along Danvers Street but this he avoided. Mrs. Hardcastle was apt to be returning with the shopping at this time of the morning and he didn't want to start any unnecessary complications by running into her.

He was in plenty of time and it was only a couple of minutes after the half-hour when he reached The Volunteer. He knew The Volunteer well. Mrs. Kentish and he were old friends. When he went in there she was behind the bar with that fantastic edifice of piled up peroxidized hair and that stately bust swathed, as always in shiny black bombasine. She was, Arthur often thought, the epitome of a vanished period.

“ ‘Morning, Mrs. K.’ ”

She greeted him with a smile. She knew him without knowing who he was. She knew him as a regular, somebody in the writing world who obviously hadn't quite made the grade and who in her opinion never would now. But at the same time as somebody. There was something about him, an occasional glint in his eye, which gave you the uncomfortable feeling that you might be wrong in setting this man down as one who would never do anything. You got the impression in those rare flashes that he was the sort of man who might get himself involved in almost anything.

She didn't know his name but she could remember his drink. She had an almost unfailing memory as far as that detail about people was concerned.

“ Usual, dear? ” she asked.

Arthur nodded, a great deal of self esteem restored and confirmed in him by that simple query. He was remembered and known.

He watched with approval whilst the Scotch was poured into the glass and then glass and siphon pushed towards him.

“ How have you been keeping, dear? ” Mrs. K. asked.

“ Oh, all right, I've moved into the country. ”

“ I thought I hadn't seen you in lately. D'you like it out there? ”

Arthur grimaced. “ So-so. Too quiet for me. ”

“ I don't think I could live out of London. ”

"I don't think I can really. Still you never know, something might turn up——"

"Busy?"

Arthur nodded. "I'm on my way to see my publisher now," he said.

"Must be wonderful to be able to write," Mrs. K. said almost wistfully. "I often wish I could. If I could tell the story of my life——"

Arthur was used to the naïve conviction of the ordinary individual that given only half a chance the world would fall over itself in a scramble to read his biography. But, with the warm glow of the Scotch inside him, it suddenly struck him that there might be something in this idea. "The Life Story of a London Barmaid." It might be possible to make something of it. Mrs. K. was obviously a bit of a character; if she gave him the stuff he could probably do something with it.

He filed the idea as one to put forward to Vincent Andrews after the talk about his present book was finished.

He pushed his glass forward and glanced up at the clock.

"I'll have the other half, Mrs. K.," he said.

He knew that Andrews was a stickler for punctuality, a virtue which he himself was apt to despise—"If the only thing a man can think about is being on time he isn't worth much"—and he did not intend to be late.

He finished his second Scotch, said good morning to Mrs. Kentish and went out feeling entirely righteous. He was completely sober and he would be in time.

He *was* in time; the clock on the wall of the intimidatingly smart "Inquiries" office of 15 Bloomsbury Square showed two minutes to twelve when he went in.

"Can I help you?"

"I have an appointment with Mr. Andrews—Arthur Engleton."

"I'll just let Mr. Andrews know, Mr. Engleton."



"Engleton's downstairs," V.A. said up in his office. "I suppose I had better have him up and get it over."

Lucian Hoyle nodded and slipped off the arm of the chair where he had been perched. "Don't take too long," he said, "I'm rather excited about this MS. I got this morning and I want to have a word with you about it."

"I'm not happy about this, Vincent."

"Turning down stuff is never pleasant."

"I've a feeling that Engleton is probably depending on this book a good deal; that if we turn it down——"

"But we can't *accept* it, Vincent! I reread some of it last night. It's the essence of mediocrity. It's the sort of woolly-woolly pabulum that we've got to keep out of our list at all costs."

"Yes—yes, I suppose so."

"Vincent, you're a good deal older than I am. You've seen more of the game. But even I know that Bloomsbury is full of Arthur Engletons. Plenty of talent, plenty of opportunity, but they are in and out of the pubs, they miss their chances, they never get geared to success. A firm can carry one of them for so long but not when he really begins to sink. Half the secret of being a successful publisher is in knowing when to cut out your dead wood. And cutting it out. Don't you agree?"

Vincent Andrews nodded. "I agree," he said, and picking up the telephone he said to the girl in the downstairs office, "Ask Mr. Engleton to be good enough to come up, please."

"I'll leave you to it," Lucian Hoyle said, "and as soon as you've finished I'll be back with this MS. I feel we've got something here."

Arthur walked up the wide staircase humming. He was pleased that he had had the sense to limit his whiskies to a couple. No man could have been more sober than he was and yet the two Scotches had been just sufficient to take the cold off things.

He felt warmed and vitalised. He was able to forget the hundreds of times he had walked up the stairs of publishers' offices before, confident each time as he was now that this would be the occasion of his success, his break-through.

"Come in."

Crossing the room Arthur thought that Vincent Andrews was beginning to show his age. The old basket was going slightly bald and thickening out a bit. "Comes of sitting on your backside with a nice comfortable job all round you and nothing to worry about," Arthur thought. "I only wish I had half a chance to do the same."

"And how are you getting on in the country?" V.A. asked. "Let's see, Suffolk, is it?"

"Essex. All right. I find I can work there. I can concentrate." Arthur Engleton's answers to most questions varied according to what he thought the questioner wanted to hear, or to what, in his opinion, it would be to his advantage that the questioner should hear.

"You're lucky to be out of the daily rat race up here."

Arthur had by now caught sight of his typescript lying on the desk. When he saw it he was disturbed for a moment by a vivid mental image of the woman who had typed it for him. She came into his mind and illuminated it as brightly as a television screen in a dark room. She opened her strange eyes wide and she hummed her little snatch of tune and glided away, her bright image fading. For an agonising moment he knew that he wasn't certain whether she gave one solitary damn for him or not. . . .

". . . well now, what about these opening chapters," V.A. said. "Cigarette?"

Arthur helped himself from the proffered case. "You can have the rest of it sooner than I originally thought," he said. "Pretty well as soon as you like. Within reason. I find I'm getting down to it. Well, for one thing there's

nothing much else to do out in the country but work."

V.A. lit his own cigarette and carefully pinched out the match. Fear of fire was one of his fads.

"How do you feel about it yourself?" he asked with a sudden smile.

"I think the book will come together nicely, is coming together nicely."

"You don't think that perhaps the business of moving into the country and getting settled in a new house, and one knows all the complications there are these days, you don't think that it was perhaps a little much to ask of yourself to try to write a book during all that?"

Arthur stared at him, fear suddenly awakened in his heart.

"No, I don't," he said slowly.

"I still think the theme is sound. I think there ought to be a book there; but . . ."

"Are you telling me that you don't like these first five chapters?"

"I don't think you've done them altogether successfully . . ."

V.A. heaved an inward sigh of relief when he said that. "I've got it out," he thought, "or at least partially out." "Altogether successfully" will have to be translated into something a little more brutal maybe, but at least he can see the red light now . . .

"D'you mean they are too long or something?"

"It isn't the length exactly——"

"I can easily cut them."

"Very often cutting helps I must admit——"

"Actually two of them could probably be run together and make four chapters instead of five."

"Y-yes. It's more a question of style, well not actual style so much; it's—One has to try to judge the general effect of a book on the reader, Mr. Engleton, and I'm afraid that your typescript doesn't seem to me to be the—quite the sort of thing for our list."

The warmth of the two Scotches was a forgotten thing within Arthur. He felt cold and slightly sick.

"It's always possible to make changes——" he said, but he knew from the other man's little gesture that this was a dead end. It wasn't changes they wanted; they didn't like the bloody thing. Then why in hell didn't Andrews say so instead of beating about the bush. If you're killing a man why bother to be polite about it.

"Quite frankly, Mr. Engleton——"

"What you mean is you don't like the first five chapters?"

"That's what I've said."

"In other words you're turning them down——"

"They don't seem to me to——"

"You're turning them down?"

"All right, yes. We are turning them down."

"And you're turning the whole bloody book down too, is that it?"

"In my opinion, Mr. Engleton, you're not quite, how shall I put it, you're not quite 'on target' this time. Of course, if you write anything else we——"

"Are you or are you not turning this book down?"

"I don't believe this book would do you any good Mr. Engleton and I am quite sure it wouldn't do our list any good, so you can hardly expect us to accept it, can you?"

"I see."

"We must use our judgment after all. But, as I say, if you write——"

"I know, I know. It must be damned easy sitting there with any number of poor devils' manuscripts coming in. Ones you don't want you just chuck out. That's fine for you, Andrews——"

"Believe me, Engleton, I dread turning a typescript down."

"What's the matter with it anyway? Or are you too high and mighty to give any reasons?"

"We aren't high and mighty in the least. And we aren't infallible either. There are plenty of other publishers——"

"I still want to know what's the matter with it. We talked over the scheme of the book, you approved of that——"

"Yes. I think the idea is good."

"It was agreed that I should write four or five chapters first and the rest of the book later."

"If we liked the four or five chapters."

"Why don't you like them? What's the matter with them?"

Vincent Andrews shook his head slightly; this was a corner into which he hadn't wanted to be driven.

"There's no bite in them. One can't say it's bad writing exactly. In a sense it's worse than bad, it's mediocre; it's—it's *nothing*."

"My God, that's a nice thing to say about a man's work."

"You asked for our reasons."

"You want to try being outside trying to make a living by your pen instead of sitting up here in judgment all the time."

"I don't sit in jud . . . Well, I suppose I do in a way. But after all we've got to make up our minds whether we like a thing or not."

"And meanwhile the poor bloody author can starve."

"Engleton, you don't think I like turning down stuff, do you?"

"You don't think I like not getting any money, do you?"

"You've had fifty pounds which is non-recoverable as far as we are concerned."

"That's ten pounds a chapter. Say two pounds for a thousand words. Two quid for two days' work. Less than a jobbing gardener gets. You try living on it."

"Really, this isn't a very sensible sort of argument——"

"I suppose you want me to take the typescript away with me."

"You can take it if you want, of course; or let us post it to you."

"Good of you to afford the postage—or do I get charged with that?"

Arthur rose and made his way over to the door, leaving an acutely unhappy Vincent Andrews sitting at the desk. He wanted to say something more and didn't quite know how to do it.

Finally he blurted out:

"I—I dare say coming up to Town for this interview has been a bit of an expense. I wouldn't like you to be out of pocket. If—if I suggest a five-pound note——"

Arthur turned, with the full intention of being indignantly scornful about charitable insults, but when he saw the green five-pound note held out towards him, and when he thought of the state of his own note-case, his mood changed. He told himself that this was the final degradation, but all the same it was one that he could not deny himself.

"Naturally there's the train fare and so on," he mumbled.

"That's what I thought."

The five-pound note changed hands and without saying another word Arthur Engleton walked out of the room.

"Men have had books turned down before," he kept telling himself as he went along the pavement in the bright sunshine, "you can always write something else."

But in his heart of hearts there was a fear which he would hardly acknowledge even in that inner privacy that this might not be true. Could he always write something else? Something saleable. What Vincent Andrews had said kept running through his mind hurting him afresh each time . . . no bite . . . worse than bad . . . mediocre . . . nothing.



"Smug bastard," he growled angrily to himself. He wouldn't go back to The Volunteer, he had an obscure idea that Mrs. Kentish would read the failure in his face, would realise that he had come back from his interview defeated. "When you're a failure," he told himself bitterly, "the one thing you can't afford to do is to admit it."

He crossed New Oxford Street and walked the whole length of Shaftesbury Avenue to the Circus. Beyond Piccadilly Circus he went into a pub which at one time he used to frequent a lot, The Wellington, and the first person he saw in it was a thin, dark man whom he knew very well by sight but whose name for the moment he couldn't recall.

"Hallo Engleton, just in time to save me drinking alone. What are you going to have?"

Arthur was very ready for a drink and when the two of them had been served they took their glasses to a side table and sat down.

. . . *advertising space.* Arthur had suddenly remembered what this thin, dark man with the nervous laugh and the nicotine-stained fingers did—or used to do—for a living. He sold advertising space in some not-much-account journal. And remembering so much Arthur remembered his name too, Hunt.

"How's the advertising world?" he asked automatically.

Hunt shook his head.

"Dead. At least as far as I'm concerned. I'm only doing that part time now. You still writing?"

"Still writing."

Hunt caught and correctly interpreted the inflexion of Arthur's voice.

"Pretty bloody hard grafting, isn't it?" he asked.

"The bastards don't give you a chance."

Hunt blew two thin lanes of smoke out of his pinched nostrils.

"You can make your chances," he said. "If you get the idea." He laughed suddenly. "Got any theories for getting rid of a rich aunt?"

"I haven't even got a rich aunt."

"I have. Well, depends what you mean by rich, of course. When she dies I shall come in for about eight thousand quid. Chicken feed to some of the boys, I expect, but riches as far as I'm concerned. But do you think this fat old dame will die? Not on your fanny. She lives at Bournemouth with two poodles and believe me it's a damned hard job to tell which is Aunt and which is poodle. She does not one damned thing all day except sit and eat and grumble. And I should think she'll probably go on doing just that for another twenty years. If I knew of a safe way of bumping the old trollop off believe me the funeral would be next week. What I could do with eight thousand quid."

"You're not the only one," Arthur thought, sipping his drink, "you're not the only one."

"Where have you been lately?" Hunt demanded. "I don't seem to have seen you about."

"I've moved into the country."

Hunt, whose existence was bounded by Fleet Street, the West End and Earl's Court (where he lived) looked incredulous. He didn't really understand what "the country" was.

"How come you've done that?"

"I've bought a house. Out in Essex."

"You've *bought* a house? What sort of sized place?"

"The usual kind of thing. There's over an acre of garden."

"Have you come into money, or sold some film rights or something?"

"If you write books there's always a chance of subsidiary rights. Translation and all the various digests. That sort of thing."

Hunt nodded, thoughtfully. "I suppose you wouldn't

be interested in the idea of publishing at all?" he ventured after a pause.

"All publishers are bastards."

"Agreed. Unless we become publishers ourselves. Then, of course, it's different."

"Why do you ask?" Arthur inquired. "What's in the wind?"

Hunt drained his drink just a shade ostentatiously and set down his glass. After only the slightest pause Arthur took the hint.

"The other half?" he suggested.

"Good idea."

Hunt had a way of observing details and it didn't escape his notice that when Arthur paid for the drinks at the bar he did so with a five-pound note. Fivers were rarities in Leonard Hunt's life.

When Arthur came back with the drinks Hunt raised his and said: "Here's how. It's done me good meeting you again."

"Me, too."

"Nice to meet somebody who understands what you are talking about. I suppose you keep pretty busy these days?"

"There's always a lot of reviewing to be done. And after all there's more than one publisher isn't there? I mean, if a man can write, a professional writer, well he can take his stuff where he likes to sell it, can't he?"

"Quite," Hunt said, not knowing exactly what to make of this.

"What was this nonsense you were talking, about killing off your rich aunt?"

"Quite honestly I'd do it if I thought I could get away with it. Shocking, of course—but *is it?* I'm a bit of a statistician, that's a hell of a word to say, you try it. Anyway, figures about things, all sorts of things, fascinate me. I reckon that in the last twenty years at the very least thirty million people have been violently and deliberately

killed by other people. All in the sacred name of patriotism or religion or what have you. Thirty million. About two-thirds of them fit and active. And a lot of medals given for it. Yet if I go and push one fat old woman down a lift shaft and she breaks her neck, by God, the whole machinery of the State is up in arms and I've got to swing for it. All right, all right, I'm only kidding, I know——"

"What made you think of a lift shaft?" Arthur asked, staring steadily into his glass.

"No; but joking apart, what I'm after is this; are you interested in the possibility of coming in on a good thing?"

"It all depends——"

"Quite right. Of course, it does. And, like I said earlier, you can do all right for yourself if you've got a good idea."

"Have you got a good idea?"

"Yes, I have. A corker. How many restaurants are there in London?"

"How many restaurants? I haven't the foggiest idea."

"Nor have I, really. But a hell of a lot. And I'm not talking about the Berkeley at the one end or Lyons' Corner House at the other. In between there must be a heck of a lot of places where people eat and pay pretty well for eating. Agreed?"

Arthur nodded.

"All right, then." Hunt leant forward. "Restaurant Newspapers Limited."

"Restaurant newspapers?"

"What happens when you go into Quag's or Prunier's or Lo Spiedo or anywhere you like? You sit down and they give you time to consider the menu and the wine list. You choose an entrecôte steak or a grilled sole. It must be fifteen minutes before it's ready. What are you doing during the fifteen minutes?"

"Eating the first course, I suppose."

"Grapefruit, eaten in two minutes. Soup lapped up in one. The point I'm making is that one way and another in any good restaurant people sitting down for lunch or dinner have quite a bit of time when they aren't actually eating.

"Now, suppose on each table there is an attractively got up, I'm going to call it a newspaper but it wouldn't be a newspaper really, more likely it would be of stiff card folded once; anyway this thing is there well printed and full of interesting bits. Plays, cinemas, all sorts of shows; what's on in town generally with a line or two about each; books possibly, with a list of the six current best sellers; odd facts about London; big houses near London worth seeing; maybe even a fashion note or two for women, yes I think that's a good idea, we should want something of a specific feminine interest—get the idea?"

Arthur nodded slowly. "Yes, I think I do."

"We could have something about wine, everyone is getting mighty wine conscious these days and of course if the particular restaurant wanted to push one or two of their own wines that could be arranged, too. In other words provide the restaurateur with something he can put on every table that people will be interested and amused by for five minutes or so."

"And what do we charge for it?"

"Charge? Nothing. Supply each restaurant with at least four copies per table per day free. So that there will always be a clean copy on the table. No wine or food stains. Supply them free, delivered by motor-cycle and sidecar van twice a week. I'm thinking in terms of two editions a week, Mondays and Thursdays probably. What we should get our money from would be advertisements. After all I know that side of things pretty well. We should be the first in a completely new field. It's a new idea. Places of entertainment, wine merchants, tobacco people, jewellers, women's shops—I don't think

we should have any difficulty in selling the space at reasonably good prices."

Arthur nodded again. "Sounds as though you might have something there," he admitted.

"And the point is," Hunt went on, with mounting warmth, "that we want damn' all in the way of staff. I reckon we want two chaps, suppose it's you and me, who know their way about the West End and who can turn a pen to a quick paragraph about pretty well anything. One of them has got to know how to deal with printers, I can tackle that on my head; one of them has got to be able to drive a motor-cycle and sidecar; both have got to be knocking about all the time, in and out of pubs, theatre bars, cinema foyers, that sort of thing."

"You really think we could get the advertisements?"

"I'm sure of it. It's a new idea; a new medium. What every advertiser wants is a way of getting at the public that hasn't been used before."

"What about office staff?"

"Office staff? All we need is a really bright girl, well a bit more than a girl, we want a woman of thirty maybe who can type, deal with the telephone, look after things generally. A good voice and good looks and somebody who knows how many beans make five. If we get the right person she could be worth a lot of business to us. I don't say I've anybody lined up at the moment but I can find someone. Or maybe you know of someone who would suit?"

"I—and what about capital?"

"Well, there you are. The rich aunt. Not that we should want eight thousand to start us off. Of course not. But you've got to have enough to get floated and to carry you on for the first six months until you've had time to establish yourself."

"How much?"

"I'm not a financial wizard and don't pretend to be.



But you'd need a couple of thousand in the kitty to start things going wouldn't you? And once we did start I believe we could build up a nice little business for ourselves."

## CHAPTER XII

"How DID you get on in London yesterday?"

Arthur had come back late and unsober and Jean had wisely left any discussion of his day till the following morning.

But he seemed a good deal more interested in his *Daily Mail* than in anything else and it was clear from his noncommittal grunts that the conversation was not likely to prosper.

"Did you see Vincent Andrews?"

"Yes. Of course. That's why I went to London. I said so. You know that."

"Of course I know you said so——"

"Why ask then?"

After half a minute Jean tried again.

"But Arthur, I'm interested in this. I want to know how you got on with Andrews. Has he read those first five chapters?"

"He wouldn't have sent for me otherwise."

"Does he like them?"

Arthur, with his eyes still on his paper, nodded.

"Yes, he thinks they are all right."

He didn't enjoy telling this particular lie but he simply could not bring himself to admit the truth, because only he could know just how bad the truth was . . . the truth was that he was washed up and finished as a writer. He could turn out an adequate review or knock up an occasional article on some given subject but when it came to original creative work he was finished. Vincent Andrews

had pronounced sentence on him . . . *worse than bad; mediocre; no bite; nothing* . . . He was dry, wrung out. He had made the book he was trying to write a test case with himself. If this failed, if he couldn't make the grade with this one, then he knew he was on the way out.

But something within him, some stubbornness or even some relic of pride, would not let him acknowledge this aloud. So he answered woodenly:

"Yes, he thinks they are all right"; and for fear that the talk would be prolonged he gathered up his paper and marched off to the study.

He didn't attempt to do any work; he simply sat there smoking and still idly looking at the paper.

Presently he turned the *Daily Mail* to one side and stared out at the garden. He didn't see the garden, which he hated anyway; he was thinking about what Leonard Hunt had suggested to him; he was thinking, if you had a rich aunt and she died suddenly and left you say six and a half thousand pounds by God what you could do with it. For one thing you could tell all the smug bastards like Vincent Andrews to go to hell and stay there. He was thinking of Valerie Stockley. Even if he had tried to get away from it he wouldn't have been able to. She coloured his thoughts most of the time.

When he thought about her he didn't know whether she was laughing at him or not. Sometimes he thought she was. He thought she despised him for not being more successful; but only because underneath she believed he could be successful. "You need organising," she had said and he knew it was true. He needed her to organise him.

At eleven o'clock he left the study. He hadn't written a line. He hadn't time to. He had just sat there thinking.

Jean was crossing the hall, duster in hand, as he came through the study doorway.

"You're out early, aren't you?"

"I don't seem to be able to get going to-day. I think I'll get a bit of fresh air."

"I don't honestly think you'll find the air in the Clarendon particularly fresh."

"Who says I'm going to the Clarendon?"

"Arthur, are you seriously asking me to believe that you are setting out for a country walk at eleven o'clock in the morning?"

"You can believe what the hell you like."

"And before you go I want a couple of pounds please, for the butcher. If we aren't careful we shall be getting into debt——"

"Aren't we in debt already?"

"No, we aren't. So far, since we've been here at Platts, I've been able to keep straight. Just. And I've asked you for very little. But I can't go on doing it by myself. I must have help from you. And at the moment what I want is two pounds."

"If we didn't live in this damned great place we wouldn't have all these bills to pay."

"Don't be silly, Arthur. Whether you live in a bed-sitter or in Buckingham Palace you've still got to eat. And Platts isn't a damned great place——"

"It's too big for us. Look at the garden."

"If you'd do some work in the garden we could grow some of our own food."

"I'm a writer not a jobbing gardener."

"I accept that. All I say is give me some of the money you make by writing. I can't pay all the bills myself."

Reluctantly, and with a very bad grace, Arthur took two pound notes out of his case and almost threw them on to the hall table. "You seem to think making money is easy," he said. "You want to try it for a change."

He had every intention of going to the Clarendon; at that time of the morning the natural place for Arthur to go, if he went anywhere, was a pub.

But as he was nearing the stop down the road the midmorning Witherley bus came in sight behind him.

He put up his hand and when the bus stopped climbed up into it.

It stopped again by the Clarendon less than a quarter of a mile farther on but he did not get out.

He knew suddenly why he wanted to leave his study and get away from the house; and it was not to go to the Clarendon.

The bus terminus was in the market square of Witherley and when he alighted Arthur stood for a moment uncertainly. Then catching sight of a postman he crossed the pavement and asked him if he knew where Mill Cottage was.

"Mill Cottage?" the man screwed up his face in the business of remembering. "That's where Mrs. Stockley lives, isn't it?"

"That's right," Arthur said quietly; it seemed extraordinary to hear her name thus casually on somebody else's lips.

"New Barn Lane. Up to the lights from here, turn left and it will be the third, no fourth, turning on the right."

New Barn Lane was one of the older and still unchanged parts of Witherley; it led away from what was now more or less a main road and curved purposelessly into the countryside; high-banked and so narrow, that in parts two vehicles would have had difficulty in passing.

The lodge entrance to some big house stood on the left; and a little farther along the lane, round the next of its sudden twists, there was a small brick cottage on the right hand side, the front of it right up against the lane side.

"Mill Cottage" said a painted wooden sign nailed on to one end of it and Arthur read the words with a disturbing feeling in his heart.

There was no door evident at first until he discovered

that to reach it he had to go a few paces up a side entrance where, at one end of the cottage there was a porch and a doorway, and a glimpse of a small patch of orchard behind.

When she opened the door to him he couldn't tell whether she was pleased to see him or not.

She was wearing tight-fitting green slacks and a red sweater. He was acutely and desperately conscious of her body and its attraction for him.

She looked at him without saying anything for a moment, smiling very slightly.

"I—I was just wondering if you'd be in," he said.

"Come in."

The front door led straight into a very small room. It had one or two good pieces of furniture in it and on one wall a large ornately decorated mirror.

"Cigarette?"

Arthur took one from the proffered green box.

"A drink? Beer? Scotch?"

"A Scotch and soda would make a different man of me."

She laughed lightly and hummed as she went out of the door into, as he imagined, some minute kitchen parts. His eyes followed the neat, almost fastidious and yet grossly provocative movements of her body in the close-fitting clothes.

She came back with two charged glasses and held one out for him.

"I knew you would come here this morning."

"How can you have known? I didn't know myself till I had actually left the house."

She nodded. "But I did all the same. I felt it."

He laughed and shook his head.

"What's the matter? Don't you usually work in the morning?"

"Usually. Not always. I'm not a bloody bank clerk. I can't write to order. Sometimes you sit down and pick

up your pen and there's nothing there. It just won't come."

"You need inspiration."

Arthur grinned. "That's what I thought. That's why I came here."

"Does *she* know you are here?"

"Nobody knows what I do except myself."

"And me. How did you get on in London yesterday?"

Arthur stared at her. "How the devil did you know I went to London yesterday?"

"Magic. I'm a witch. Didn't you know?"

"By God, you could be at that. I've not seen you wearing those things before."

"Slacks?" She uncurled her legs and stretched one out slowly in front of him. "Like them?"

"How did you know I went up to London?"

The woman laughed. "I happened to see you walk into the station just after nine. It wasn't really very difficult to figure out that you would be catching the nine-twelve to Town."

"I didn't see you."

"I can make myself invisible. Didn't you know?"

"I went up to see my publishers about those first five chapters you typed for me."

"I don't know about the book world, Arthur. Tell me. Don't you wait till a book's finished, or do you send it to them bit by bit?"

"Andrews wanted to see four or five chapters first. To see if he liked it. That was the agreement."

The woman nodded watching him closely. She knew now that for some reason things had gone wrong. In a way she was glad.

When this man had a success in anything she wanted to have a hand in it.

"What went wrong?" she asked quietly.

"Andrews turned it down. Didn't like it."

"Why?"



Arthur shrugged his shoulders. Not to her even was he going to say what Vincent Andrews's verdict on his writing had actually been.

"You can't make people like a thing," he said. "If a man doesn't want a particular thing for his list, well, there you are."

"Who is this Andrews anyway? God, or the Pope, or something? Aren't there other publishers?"

"Plenty. Publishers make so much money out of authors they spring up like mushrooms."

"Try some of them, then."

"Yes, I could do that, of course. I shall do it, naturally."

"You don't sound to me as though you will."

"I don't believe I can write in the country. I don't believe I ever will write anything down here. I don't care what the conditions of living in London are, at least it is living. You're in and out of pubs; you meet people; just to feel people round you, to see them, keeps you alert. You're living. You get a stimulus all the time. When you sit down to write there's something in your mind. Down here, at that damned house, what is there?"

"You've got me," Valerie said. "This is the first time you've come to see me."

"I'm supposed to be in the Clarendon."

"Does it matter where you are supposed to be?"

"Not in the slightest."

Without speaking, she held out her hand for his glass and, draining it, he handed it to her.

She went out of the room again and again he watched her movements with hungry eyes.

When she came back she asked:

"What would she say if she knew you were here?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "What would any wife say?"

"What has she said about all the others?"

"There haven't been any others——"

There was a small sofa along one wall and now she lay back on this, her arms behind her head, her legs drawn up and crossed, the wooden mule dangling from one small foot. She laughed suddenly and he supposed it was in answer to what he had just said.

"——like you," he added.

"No, I know that," she answered quietly. "There can't have been. Aren't you beginning to realise that? Can't you feel it? There are some people, some threads, tangled together right from the beginning. They've got to meet and when they do they've got to be together, to influence one another."

"What that bastard Andrews said was that my stuff wasn't any good. He didn't even say it was bad. 'Mediocre.' Jesus, what a word to use about a man's writing."

"What did she say when you told her about it?"

"I haven't told her."

"No?"

"Why the hell should I go round saying I'm a failure?"

"You're not a failure."

"Ring up Vincent Andrews and tell him."

"There are other publishers, you said so yourself."

"Dozens."

"Well, then——"

Arthur shook his head. His drink was beginning to glow comfortingly inside him.

"Look, Valerie, when you've been bashing stuff out, articles and reviews and all the rest of it, as long as I have something happens to your brain. It loses its elasticity. You write. You put the words down on the paper. They are nearly what they used to be but somehow it just misses it all the time. It's—mediocre——"

She looked at him steadily.

"You're not mediocre."

"No. I don't believe I am."

"You can do things. You can be a success."

"It's just that at the moment I feel in a trough."

"How old are you?"

"Old? Forty-two."

"Forty-two." She laughed. "There you are."

"How do you mean?"

"Do you believe in astrology, Arthur?"

"Is there a bedroom in this house?"

"Where do you think I sleep?"

"That's exactly what I am wondering. Let's go up there for an hour and I'll say I believe in astrology or any other damned thing you like."

She laughed again and, with a quick jerk of her foot, kicked off the wooden mule so that it fell in his lap.

"Aren't six sevens forty-two?" she asked.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Every seven years you change yourself entirely, don't you know that? Things happen in your life every seven years. You can cut loose; start again; launch out."

"It looks like it with a manuscript just turned down."

"*You* don't think it was as bad as all that yourself, do you?"

"N-no." Arthur answered this slowly. Almost without realising it he felt a strange compulsion to speak the truth in talking to this woman. "Actually I can see what Andrews meant and although I kidded myself into thinking that he was going to like this stuff I wasn't all that much surprised at heart. It did just miss it, somehow; but only just."

"There you are. 'Only just.' Just a shade different and it would have been good. Isn't that so?"

"You're damn' well right," Arthur made a see-saw motion with his hand. "It was like this. Writing often is. If it just misses it, it's nothing; if it just catches it, so to speak, it can be terrific."

"You can be terrific, Arthur."

He laughed. "You reckon that because I'm forty-two I'm going to change?"

"Isn't your life changing?"

He stared at her.

"Since I met you—yes, I suppose it is."

"What else did you do in Town?"

"How do you know that I did anything else?"

"I didn't know—for once. I was just asking."

"I met a chap. In a pub."

"Who?"

"You wouldn't know anything about him. He used to sell advertising space in some small paper."

"Did he make any money?"

"Not much."

"I suppose you stood one another drinks you couldn't afford and swapped hard luck stories till you were both half tight?"

"And what the hell has it got to do with you if we did? Have I got to give an account to you of everything I do?"

"Yes. More or less. That's the way it's going to work out, you'll find. I can make you into somebody, Arthur. What did this chap have to say? Anything?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact he had a damned good idea."

"Tell me."

He told her about Leonard Hunt's scheme for a restaurant news-sheet characteristically stressing its good points and giving an optimistic account of it.

She listened carefully and in silence, lying on her back blowing an occasional smoke ring to float up to the ceiling, her breasts two small firm mounds under the close-fitting red sweater.

"There you are, you see," she said when he had finished. "There's a scheme for you, a possibility——"

"Hunt said we would want a woman in with us;

somebody smart and attractive looking. To do some of the office work and help in making the contacts with restaurants and advertising people. I wondered about you."

Valerie laughed and flicked the stub of her cigarette into the grate.

"What would your wife say? And anyway what about money, capital?"

"If we had two thousand, fifteen hundred probably, we could get started and keep going till we began to make a profit."

"That's simple then, isn't it? Put down your fifteen hundred and start."

"Don't be a damned fool. Where am I going to put my hands on fifty quid, let alone fifteen hundred?"

"Hasn't this Hunt character got any money?"

"He's got an aunt who's going to leave him eight thousand when she dies. So he's laying plans for pushing her down a lift shaft."

"Did he say that, down a lift shaft? Or did you think of it?"

"No. Actually he said it."

The woman laughed and stretched out a hand.

"Come over here," she said, "and kiss me."

When he bent over her and she put her arms round his neck pulling his face down to hers she whispered:

"Wasn't it odd his saying that, when you've got a lift in that house of yours?"

She kissed him passionately and expertly but then suddenly pushed him away and insisted on his sitting in his chair again.

"I went to Lumley's yesterday," she said.

"You went to Lumley's. Why?"

"Jealous? You sound it; which is rather nice. You needn't be. Maurice Lumley? My God, no. But I go there occasionally to help out with odd bits of work. Actually I was in the office most of the afternoon by

myself. The regular girl is away sick and Lumley had to go out to a sale of land somewhere."

"Am I supposed to be interested in this?"

She laughed. "You could be. Maurice isn't very good at locking things up and I had some time to spare. I came across some correspondence about Platts——"

"About Platts?"

"——and what he intends to do with it. If he can buy the property he is going to pull it down and put up at least sixteen houses on the site and some of the field next to it."

"Sixteen?"

"It's obviously going to be a big scheme and against the item 'cost of purchasing Platts' he has pencilled in £8000 with a query beside it."

"Eight thousand?"

"With a query. The query means that if he finds he is dealing with a mug he hopes to get it for a lot less."

"Eight thousand?"

"Didn't I tell you he'd give that? All you've got to do is to sell him the house."

"It isn't mine—as you very well know."

The woman made a slight shrugging movement of her small body. She seemed suddenly entirely uninterested. She was bored.

"That's up to you, after all," she said. "Isn't it?"

He found himself on his knees beside the sofa on which she was lying. He didn't want to talk with her any more. He wanted to make love to her. To possess her. He knew there was some fever in him which would not be satisfied until he had slaked it in her. Maybe it wouldn't be satisfied even then, he thought; maybe there was something about this woman which would never let him be quiet and easy again; maybe she was his evil genius, but he had to have her.

She would not even let him kiss her. She was cold suddenly and withdrawn. She pushed him away.



"Sometime, sometime, sometime," she promised him. "But not now. Sometime you and I will be completely together. Inseparable. It's destiny. I know that. But, not now."

"But——"

"Not now."

She made him go. As he walked past the window he could hear her humming her favourite tune. Mockingly, he thought; and he could imagine that she was laughing.

He thought, "That's the sort of woman I could kill—or kill for."

He didn't know how he was going to get back to Platts; he experienced that which was to be a commonplace with him later, that being with Valerie Stockley made him forget about time and normal arrangements.

Whether there was a bus that would serve him or not he didn't know; and as things turned out it didn't matter for at the beginning of Marsh Road a man in a small car, overtaking him, offered him a lift.

Once again he passed the Clarendon without going in and he found himself back in the house as Jean was finishing the preparation of lunch.

Seeing the woman in Mill Cottage had changed his whole mental attitude and to his relief Jean seemed as ready as he was to forget that they had been edgy with one another when they parted some two hours before.

"What was it like in the Clarendon?" she asked. "Anybody there?"

"Only one or two regulars. It's not a bad pub."

"You must take me there someday. Were you there all the time?"

"Of course. Where do you think I was? And I don't know what you mean by 'all the time.' When I go into a pub I like to take it easy. Have a few drinks and make 'em last is my motto."

She faced him suddenly.

"You are a liar, Arthur."

"What on earth do you mean?"

His indignation sounded genuine enough. But she was used to that. She was watching him; especially his eyes.

"You didn't go to the Clarendon. Where did you go?"

"I didn't go to the Clarendon?"

She shook her head. "No." From the pocket of the apron she was wearing she produced a telegram.

"This telegram came about ten minutes after you had left the house. I opened it. It's from P.V. saying he wants you to do some major review for him and will you ring him back at once——"

He held out his hand and said:

"Give it to me."

She waited whilst he read it and smiled grimly when he read it for a second and a third delaying time.

"Take your time," she said. "Think up a good story."

"You came down to the Clarendon with this?"

"Of course. It's work and it's urgent. I went into the bar and the barman said you hadn't been in."

"I never told you I was going there. As a matter of fact I caught a bus into Witherley and I've been knocking about there, doing a bit of shopping and so forth."

"But when you came in, a few moments ago, you said you had been in the Clarendon all the time."

"I didn't want to disappoint you."

"You simply can't help telling lies, can you?"

"You ought to know. And now, if we can have an end to the inquisition, perhaps we could get on with lunch. I'm hungry."

She said no more, knowing the futility of it; but she wondered where he had been to in Witherley that he wanted to keep secret from her.

## CHAPTER XIII

ARTHUR WENT down to the telephone kiosk at the cross-roads after lunch and rang P.V. from there.

He was commissioned to write the review in question and, since it was used as the leading article on the page, was ultimately paid seven guineas for it. Several other chance jobs came along during the next few weeks, including a commission to write a "holiday" article for a motoring magazine. They were none of them highly paid, but *in toto* the guineas mounted up; and at least they gave him an excuse to be in his study and to forget the disaster of the rejected chapters.

Jean never heard from him what had really happened in Vincent Andrews's office, but after a while she came to the conclusion that whatever it was could not have been satisfactory.

She had lived long enough with this man and close enough to his various and many dissimulations to know, by instinct more than by anything else, when he was lying.

She guessed that in spite of what Arthur had said about it, Vincent Andrews hadn't liked the book and had possibly even turned it down.

She imagined that Arthur was keeping this from her because he didn't want to confess his failure, and she could forgive him deception on that score, except that she felt hurt that there was not sufficient bond between them to make him want her help and support when things went wrong. What she could not forgive him was the growing conviction that he had started one of his affairs again.

There had been a number in the past, all of them

rather sordid and cheap, and she had hoped that he had worked that particular virus out of his system. But, thinking things over, she couldn't find any adequate reason for being so optimistic. The Arthur Engletons of life don't change much, she thought bitterly, and if she had been fool enough to marry one she must take the consequences.

She would have found it hard to give adequate reasons for her suspicions; certainly she had no proof; but here again it was a question of sad experience.

A whole host of minor details: slightly evasive answers; over elaboration of explanations when no explanation was really necessary; a shiftiness of tone or look—they were all small in themselves, even insignificant considered singly, but together they mounted up and made her first suspicious and then certain.

The incident of P.V.'s telegram started it when Arthur said that he had been in the Clarendon and hadn't; and after that, as the weeks went by, she gradually realised that what she feared must be true and that he was having an affair with some other woman.

What she feared?

She asked herself *did she fear it?* trying to analyse her feelings on the matter. Wasn't she past caring what this man did in the way of furtive affairs? Wryly she had to admit that in matters of this sort what the intellect says and what the heart says are at irreconcilable variance. She couldn't forget that this, after all, was the man of her choosing; she the woman of his. She remembered the sacrifices she had made, and for a long time had been glad to make, to help him; she thought of the cheap hotels; the pretences; the angry landladies; the everlasting making-do which she had faced and gone through simply so that she might do her job and stick by him. It was galling on top of that to come to recognise that now some doxy he could only have known for a few months at the most, who had never done anything for

him and probably—she thought—never would, should now be supplanting her.

She knew that Arthur was doing a fair number of reviews and a good deal of what he called “bits and pieces” work, and she guessed that he had abandoned work on his book. She knew that he went away from Platts for a considerable period each day and, although he might sometimes have been going to the Clarendon, he was frequently away in the afternoon and she thought it more probable that Witherley was his goal and in Witherley the woman of the moment, whoever she might be.

Her guess was that it was Valerie Stockley, the part-time typist, who had caught Arthur’s fancy.

Arthur’s original idea had been that the part-time person he was looking for might help him in some of the routine work of checking references and so on; but this plan didn’t materialise and in point of fact all that Valerie Stockley had done was to type out the ill-fated first five chapters which had been posted to her and by her posted back again. As far as Jean knew she had never been to Platts and Jean had never seen her.

With the growing certainty that she was right in what she guessed Jean was now suffering from that mixture of anger curiosity and contempt which every wife feels about the woman who has taken her place.

After the episode of the telegram at the Clarendon she didn’t ask Arthur where he had been on his daily absences from Platts; there was, after all, no point in inviting a flood of lies which, though she wouldn’t believe them, she would not be able to refute, and in any case she had too much pride to let herself appear to care.

What would become of herself and Arthur and of the life they lived together she didn’t know and since it was a problem which seemed insoluble she was content to let it lie for the present and to give herself up to Platts.

Platts meant something to her which, except in her childhood days, she had not known all through her life—possession and security. Platts was a home and it was hers.

The thousand pounds legacy which had been left to her by her Aunt Au was diminishing much more rapidly than she liked. Since the house had been fully furnished there had not been much expense in getting settled in; but there had been a few inevitable expenditures and there had been the weekly drain of living since they were there.

Arthur had always maintained a lordly, and for him highly convenient, aloofness where money was concerned.

“An author doesn’t get a weekly wage packet like a bricklayer or miner,” he had expostulated a long time ago. “It’s no good expecting me to give you so much every week. I’ll give you what I can when I can.”

“When I can” in the past had been singularly infrequently, and the result had been debt and the humiliating round of defrauded landladies and suspicious tradespeople. Jean was determined to do better than that at Platts, but getting money out of Arthur proved no easier than it had ever been and contributions from him were few and far between.

A considerable amount of the thousand pounds still remained, however, and Jean was determined to see that it wasn’t wasted or misapplied.

She was anxious to take some part in the local life, a side of things in which she knew she could never hope to interest Arthur, and by now she had made the acquaintance of a handful of other people who lived along Marsh Road.

One in particular, a Mrs. Dunning, had shown herself of a friendly disposition. She was slightly older than Jean; a widow (her husband had been a Naval Officer); and she and Jean took to one another from their first chance meeting.



Olive Dunning had no children and she occupied herself mostly with a whole host of local activities. She was the secretary of the Witherley branch of the W.I. (which Jean had promised to join) and if there was a bazaar, a rummage sale or a flag day in the district it was a safe bet that she would be concerned with it.

She had been to Platts a couple of times but, as it chanced, had not met Arthur on either of them; she was frankly curious about the house and its reputation for "spookiness" and listened with avidity to what Jean had to tell her on the subject.

"I don't think I *could* live in a haunted house," she said.

Jean laughed and said that like many other things in life it was largely a question of words. "Haunted" meant a lot of things, most of them unpleasant, in your mind when you were just thinking about it which, when you came to experience the actual thing, at Platts, anyway, it didn't mean at all.

"It's just that somebody who lived here at some time—the original owner is my guess—liked the place so much that he hasn't quite left it yet."

"But aren't you frightened?"

"Not in the slightest. Rather the reverse actually. You see *I* like the place. I love it. And I'm sure the—oh, what a horrible word *spook* is but I suppose we've got to use it—the spook, then, *knows* that I love it, so he's friendly towards me. And in any case, although there is something there undoubtedly, it isn't often obtrusive and unless something happens to upset it you can go for days and not notice a thing."

"And doesn't your husband mind?"

"Oh, I don't think he even notices half the time," Jean said laughing, "you know what men are."

Arthur had no more feeling for Platts than he had had for any of the dozen different places they had lived in since being married. All he wanted from a house was that

he should be able to eat, drink, keep warm and sleep there; if it provided him with these essentials he wasn't interested any further. The fact that Platts had a garden meant nothing to him; as far as he was concerned a garden was merely a space round a building, which delayed by a few seconds one's access to street or road. Jean did at first make a few tentative efforts to interest him in tidying the place, but she never really entertained any serious hopes of success and soon gave it all up.

Arthur spent most of every morning in his study; as it happened quite a spate of reviewing and small work had come in and he would have had enough to keep him busy even if he had been working normally. But he was working badly.

"I'm a writing animal," he had once said bitterly, "I could write an article about a broomstick if anybody offered me three guineas for it."

But now, at Platts, in his own study, the ability to sit down and write was deserting him. He sat down and picked up his pen but when he stared at the blank sheet of foolscap it wasn't blank at all. Valerie Stockley's fantastically light-coloured hair, Valerie Stockley's mocking brown eyes, Valerie Stockley's small wicked face looked at him from it.

He would find himself thinking of her and trembling slightly as in days past he knew himself to do when he needed a drink badly.

In his mind he would go over their last conversation together—generally of the afternoon before—trying to see why it had gone wrong, why she had been angry with him, where he had displeased her.

Instead of working he would pick up the little red booklet which was the local time-table and stare at the meagre services along Marsh Road into Witherley.

He knew the times of all the buses by heart now but he still stared at them in print.

As it happened the buses, making things easy for a

man's destruction, were highly convenient in the afternoon.

There were very few of them but such as there were suited well.

He could catch one at the stop not far from the gate of Platts at two-fifteen and be in Mill Cottage before the half-hour; and for coming back there was a bus from the Market Square in Witherley at four-thirty and another at six.

Sometimes, in a sort of airy shamefacedness, he talked glibly about "exploring Witherley" but usually he kept to the golden rule for all would-be deceivers and said nothing and Jean had too much pride to question him. She assumed bitterly that he was enjoying himself with the current affair and that in due time it would fizzle out to the usual ignominious end.

But as it happened she was quite wrong about Arthur enjoying himself. Actually the poor devil was getting hell. In Valerie Stockley he had come up against somebody just as essentially selfish as he was and a very great deal deeper.

*"Anything you can do  
I can do better."*

If the jingle she so often hummed had been rewritten:

*"Anything evil you can do  
I can do instinctively better than you."*

it would have been terrifyingly true.

Since that savage and silent session in Arthur's dressing-room at Platts she had not let him make love to her again. This was partly because it amused her to deny him and to keep him frustrated and sulkily hopeful; partly because she thought she had more power over him that way.

It was an inescapable urge in her to have absolute

and complete power over a man so that he would do anything she wanted him to, when and how she told him to do it.

To gain that mastery she was willing now and then to let him possess her physically for a few brief moments, but the occasions would be few and far between.

Arthur would sometimes leave Mill Cottage in a furious temper swearing that he wouldn't come there the following day. She always let him go smilingly; and he always came back; if he hadn't he would have had to pay for it.

She staggered him one afternoon by saying suddenly:

"Arthur, give me ten pounds."

"Ten pounds?"

She was in her favourite position: lying on her back on the small sofa, her legs drawn up, her hands behind her head.

She looked at him speculatively through the swirl of cigarette smoke.

"Twenty, if you like. I'm going away."

"Going away?"

She laughed, gratified by the alarm in his voice.

"Only for a holiday. Two weeks. Like to come? And I want some money for incidental expenses. A drink every evening to remember you by."

"If I had ten quid you should have it."

"Why haven't you got ten quid?"

"Because I'm a writer not a successful business man."

"Can't writers be successful?"

"Maybe. I haven't been, that's all."

"You could be."

Arthur spread his hands. "Maybe, maybe."

"You make me sick, Arthur. 'Maybe, maybe.' Why aren't you successful? What's ten pounds anyway? You'd have to spend that if you took me out to dinner in the West End. You must have money to run a place like Platts."

"I make some by reviewing, you know all about that, I've told you a dozen times. If you wait a bit I dare say I could——"

"Wait? Wait for ten quid!"

Arthur flushed and said: "Jean was left a thousand pounds; that's what we run Platts on."

"Borrow some from her."

"I might do that."

"I want you to. I want you to get some money from your wife and give it to me, so that I can spend it on my holiday. Promise me?"

He stared at her.

She laughed and said: "You think that's bad of me, don't you? Evil?"

He nodded.

"And that's how you like me, isn't it?"

He nodded again.

"What time is your bus back?"

"Six, if I wait till then."

"Wait till then——"

That was the second time they made love together and, as before, the woman suddenly abandoned the pretence of cold indifference she had been wearing and became almost savagely violent and demanding.

When it was over she reverted suddenly to her exacting, dissatisfied mood.

Arthur was dismissed to catch his bus. "Go back to your wife," she told him "and to the house she won't let you sell."

"When are you going away?"

"Soon."

"I'll be down to-morrow."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I say not. If you sold Platts for eight thousand pounds we could go away on holiday together."

"It isn't mine."

She looked into his eyes. "Nothing is yours unless you make it so."

Next morning at breakfast Arthur was astonished to get a letter from Valerie Stockley. It was the first she had ever written to him and he had not envisaged it as likely that she would write. The envelope was a deep purple in colour and although he had never seen her writing he knew for a certainty that the letter was from her.

He was so sure of it that he didn't open it at the breakfast table but slipped it into his pocket and took it into the study with him.

It had been written on a whim, in the aftermath of emotion when he had left her the previous afternoon. It was like a lot of her conversation with him, teasing and flippant. It bade him, among other things, not to forget that she was going away on holiday and that she wanted ten pounds. . . .

At midmorning Jean came in to say that she was going out shopping and that there would be no elevenses in consequence.

"Have you got any money?" Arthur asked her.

"Enough for the shopping. Yes. I'm all right——"

"No, I mean to lend me. I want ten pounds."

"Ten pounds! Whatever for, Arthur?"

"Good God, to live with. You don't expect me to keep an account of every ha'penny I spend do you?"

She looked at him steadily and shook her head.

"I can't possibly lend you ten pounds, Arthur."

"Why not? You've got it."

"We can't afford it. I dare say I could manage a pound——"

"Oh, forget it."

He motioned her angrily out of the room and turned to his work again.

Ten minutes after Jean had left the house the front-door



bell rang and, grumbling at the interruption, he went to see who it was.

A middle-aged woman whom he had never seen before smiled at him and held out a large cardboard box.

"Mr. Engleton——?"

Arthur nodded.

"I've been asked to leave all this for your wife. The flag day for spastic children. There's everything there and someone from the county office will collect it, probably to-morrow."

When he took the box from her Arthur was surprised by its unexpected weight and nearly dropped it.

"It's the money," she explained laughing. "All the coppers. There's quite a bit of silver as well, of course, but it's the coppers that make it so heavy."

He put the box down on the chest in the hall and when the woman had gone, began to examine it.

Unsold flags, collecting boxes, badges for the collectors, all the paraphernalia of a flag day was there. At some central collecting place the boxes had been emptied and their contents listed.

Arthur studied the list.

Notes	£1	2	0	0
	10/-	3	0	0
Silver		8	6	6
Copper and 3d. bits		4	2	3
		<hr/>		
		£17	8	9
		<hr/>		

This list was tied to the neck of a blue linen bag which obviously held the cash.

Arthur untied the neck of the bag and investigated.

The notes were clipped together, five pounds altogether; the silver was in two small paper bags used by banks,

one full, containing five pounds, the other only partially filled with the balance.

Whoever organised the flag day for Witherley and the wider district embracing the country round could hardly be expected to know the risks they were running in using the helpful and co-operative Mrs. Engleton's house as a convenient collecting ground for the day's takings.

Normally this would have been done a little farther along Marsh Road at Mrs. Dunning's; but Mrs. Dunning was away on holiday and their house shut up and it was Mary Dunning herself who, before going away, had suggested Mrs. Engleton of Platts as a suitable substitute in the matter.

The organisers, therefore, could hardly be expected to realise that they were running a risk. They couldn't tell that Jean would be out and that to put some seventeen pounds in cash into the hands of her husband was about as safe as putting a lighted torch into the hands of a pyromaniac.

When Arthur took what he wanted, the notes and five pounds of the silver, he did so justifying the action by repeating to himself what the woman had said about "to-morrow." Naturally he didn't intend to steal the ten pounds and by the time the county people came next day he and Jean would have managed to put it right between them. Whether he could have hypnotised himself sufficiently really to believe this or not hardly mattered; he hypnotised himself sufficiently to think he believed it; or at any rate to come so near thinking that he believed it that he put the notes away in his case, slipped the bag of silver into a side pocket and, without troubling to return to the study, went out of the front door.

Jean got back to Platts just before one o'clock and without bothering to confirm that Arthur was still working in the study, set about preparing the midday

meal. She had come, carrying her shopping bag, straight into the kitchen through the back door and was thus unaware of the parcel in the hall.

At ten-past one the front-door bell rang. When she opened the door a woman stood there with a large cartridge envelope.

"Mrs. Engleton?"

"Yes?"

"You're having the spastic children's money here instead of at Mrs. Dunning's, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"When I left everything this morning with your husband I missed out two villages. Tewley and Little Tewley, would you put it in with the rest?"

"Yes, of course. Did you come here this morning, then?"

"Yes. I left it all with your husband."

When the front door was closed again Jean called "Arthur" twice and got no answer. She went to the study and to her surprise it was empty. She had assumed that Arthur was in there all the time, and now supposed, with a misgiving heart, that he must be in the Clarendon.

She went back into the hall and opened the large cardboard box in order to add the small extra amount from the two forgotten villages to the total.

She examined the statement of the money collected with interest:

Notes	£1	2	0	0
	10/-	3	0	0
Silver		8	6	6
Copper and 3d. bits		4	2	3
		<hr/>		
		£17	8	9
		<hr/>		

She had been concerned herself with collecting some of this and felt a comfortable glow of satisfaction at what seemed to her to be a very good result.

When she opened the bag to add the extra money she got a surprise. No notes were visible. She searched again, but search was hardly necessary; simply and plainly there were no notes. And after a few seconds she realised that the silver couldn't possibly total eight pounds odd.

She tipped it out and counted it and made it come to three pounds six and sixpence.

She counted the silver twice and once again searched vainly (and as by now she knew, unnecessarily) for the notes and she could not escape the obvious conclusion: five pounds in notes and five pounds in silver were missing from the collected money.

She remembered Arthur's odd request to her that morning about borrowing ten pounds and she began to feel very angry.

She went back into the study not expecting for one moment to see anything of the money but with the vague idea that there might be some sort of clue there as to what Arthur wanted it for.

Arthur apparently had been reading a book for review. The book, an autobiography, lay open on his table; a sheet of foolscap with no more than a line and a half of writing on it lay close by.

Jean viewed that line and a half of writing sardonically. In its futility as representing a morning's work it seemed typical of Arthur.

She was turning away from the table when something on the ground caught her eye.

It was a letter written on purple-coloured paper, and she remembered now an envelope of that same colour at the breakfast table.

She bent down and picked it up and read it, turning to the signature first.

"V.S." sprawled in green ink did not surprise her.

She glanced at the heading: "Mill Cottage, New Barn Lane," which meant nothing to her except that it was presumably somewhere in Witherley.

Then the words "ten pounds" in the text caught her eye and she read the whole letter.

When she had finished, and had read it a second and even a third time, she felt angrier with Arthur than she had ever been before. For some reason or other the woman he had got himself involved with wanted ten pounds—simply as spending money for her holiday.

The letter seemed to suggest—and there could hardly be any doubt that Arthur had stolen it for her out of the flag day money. Of all the thefts and subterfuges which she had known him indulge in this seemed to Jean to be the meanest. Thinking about it made her feel sick with anger.

When half-past one and then a quarter to two came and Arthur had not come back she began to think that probably he was not in the Clarendon but in Witherley.

At Mill Cottage. Giving away the money he had stolen.

Whilst Jean was eating her meal alone she decided to catch the afternoon bus into Witherley.

She was not so lucky as Arthur had been in getting directions and it took her some little time to find out where Mill Cottage was and to walk there from the centre of Witherley.

Had she been twenty minutes earlier she would have surprised Arthur there but he was in fact leaving Witherley to go back to Platts as she came into the town.

But when Jean did eventually arrive at Mill Cottage there was somebody else there.

A large black saloon stood in the narrow lane and Maurice Lumley was inside talking to Valerie Stockley about the possibility of her going more regularly to his office to help with the ever increasing clerical work.

Jean knocked on the door and when it was opened the two women confronted one another.

Valerie at once knew who her unexpected visitor was and felt an elation. She was almost sorry that Jean hadn't come twenty minutes earlier whilst Arthur was still there.

"Were you looking for anybody?" she asked.

Jean recognised the deliberately insulting nature of the question and even in the extremity of anger she felt against him she could still think "poor Arthur." It was so entirely typical of him to get tied up with a hard-bitten, cheap little adventuress like this with her minute stature and her fantastically peroxidized hair.

"Are you Valerie Stockley?" she asked.

Valerie nodded, smiling at her, and began to hum lightly and derisively under her breath.

"I am. And you're Jean Engleton, aren't you? What do you want?"

Jean was aware now that there was a third person in the room. A man. Someone she had seen up at Platts and whom she didn't like, though for the moment, intent as she was on other things, she couldn't quite remember why.

She didn't mind his being there; in a way she was glad of it. She intended to humiliate this predatory, peroxidized creature and if there was somebody else there to witness it so much the better.

"Has my husband been here to see you to-day?"

"Arthur?" Valerie affected to consider. "Why do you want to know?" she asked after a pause.

"I think he has been here and not only to-day. I think he has been in the habit of coming here to see you."

"And what if he has?"

"I think you have asked him for money."

"I don't ask men for money——"

"Don't you?"



"——they give it me. If I want it. And if they like me sufficiently."

"Leave my husband alone, Mrs. Stockley."

"If he wants to come and see me here why shouldn't he?"

"Because I don't want him to."

Valerie shrugged her shoulders.

"You had better tell him soon, then, hadn't you? After all, I've been up to your house."

"You've been to Platts?"

"Didn't you know?"

"Never dare to come again."

"If Arthur asks me——"

"Never come again. You're just a cheap little tart. A ten-pound tart. Ten pounds. And whether my husband asks you or not don't dare to come to Platts again. Platts is my house. Do you understand that? *Mine*. I own it and I don't want you in it, or near it. If you're wise you'll keep away; if you are silly enough to come up then I'll have you run out by the police. If you want ten pounds so badly why don't you walk up and down the pavements of Witherley for an evening?"

Jean was shaking with rage, rage as much against the fatuous deceitful weak-willed liar she was married to as against this latest example of his folly.

But she felt better for having exploded in the way she had done and for having spoken her mind.

She had the sense not to add anything further and after that last vitriolic sentence about walking the streets of Witherley she turned from the door and went away down the lane.

Valerie Stockley stared after her, white with anger. She had forgotten Maurice Lumley in the room behind her; forgotten everything except a murderous rage against the woman walking down the lane. Had she had at that moment a pistol in her hand she would have fired it.

Lumley had enjoyed it all. Valerie had been proving high and mighty and difficult with him of late and it was amusing to see her properly told off by someone whom Lumley judged to be just a shade above her in the social scale.

"Mrs. Engleton doesn't seem to like you," he said with a laugh.

Valerie Stockley closed the door and turned into the cottage.

"For God's sake stop that insane laughing," she said. "She'll learn she can't come down here and talk like that to me. She'll learn."

She was a very angry and a very dangerous woman.

## CHAPTER XIV

JEAN TAXED ARTHUR about stealing the flag-day money not because she imagined that there was any hope of getting it back from him but because of her intense anger at the meanness of what he had done.

In typical fashion he first of all neither admitted nor denied having taken it; and then he insisted that he had only borrowed the money and had every intention of paying it back; and in the end actually managed to work himself up into a fine show of indignation at what he called a fuss about nothing.

Jean left him in no doubt as to what she thought of his action but there were times when it was impossible to puncture the thick hide of insensitivity which this man could deliberately assume; only when Jean went on to tell him that she had actually been to Mill Cottage could she be sure that she had touched him.

"You went to Mill Cottage?" he asked. "Whatever for?"

"To find you. It wasn't an unreasonable guess was it?"

Arthur flushed slightly.

"And to find out if you had taken your part-time typist the ten pounds she was asking for."

"What ten pounds?"

"The ten pounds she asked you for in a letter you got from her this morning."

"You mean that you actually read one of my letters?"

Jean laughed wearily.

"Come off it, Arthur. After nine years of what you call subterfuges you can hardly expect to get away with adopting a high moral tone, can you?"

"I owed Mrs. Stockley that money for work she had done for me. She was quite entitled to ask for it, wasn't she?"

Jean shook her head.

"You're a good liar, Arthur; but you've told me too many. As soon as I saw Mrs. Stockley I knew the sort of work she does for you. I can't stop you going to see her but I've told her never to come up to this house again. I've forbidden her the house, do you understand that?"

"What about you and your boy friend?"

"My God, what's this you're inventing now? What boy friend?"

"Valerie saw you having tea together in Witherley and he has been up here to the house to see you, young Richard Foster."

"Well, what about him?"

Arthur shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't try to be too high and mighty with me, that's all."

"Richard isn't quite twenty. He thinks he's in love with me. I've told him not to be silly and to run off and find some girl six years younger than I am and unmarried."

Someone who has had the sense not to tie herself up with a useless encumbrance of a husband——”

“Thanks very much,”

“That’s what you call my affair with my boy friend.”

“You mean that’s your account of what I call your affair with your boy friend.”

“You can believe what you like——”

“I propose to believe what I like. Meanwhile, if you’ve said all the unpleasant things you want to say, I wonder if I can be allowed to get on with some work——”

“For God’s sake do some work,” Jean snapped at him. “Make some money and pay me back the ten pounds you stole from the flag-day funds.”

Although in the past some of the quarrels between them had been more violent than this one, both of them felt inwardly that this was a turning point.

Jean could not get over the meanness of what her husband had done, and although she knew that he had had various affairs before yet there was something about the woman in Mill Cottage which warned her that this might be different. As far as she knew, Arthur’s previous weaknesses had got him into the hands of silly women; now she thought that he was in the power of an evil one.

Had they still been living in London she would undoubtedly have left Arthur at this stage; but here at Platts it was different. Platts was hers and in no circumstances would she dream of leaving it. She loved the house with the friendly “feel” about it and she loved the garden in which she did so much work. She would have been happier if Arthur had left her to live alone there; but provided that he didn’t make too obvious a nuisance of himself and provided he realised she despised his lies and subterfuges so much that she was past caring about them, he could go on sleeping in the dressing-room and working, or pretending to work, in the study.

Arthur accepted this bitter armistice. By the irony of things it happened that, directly after the affair of the

flag-day money, a further spate of work came in and he was unusually busy. He had a genuine reason for shutting himself up in the study for hours together every morning and he had no difficulty in persuading himself how badly he was being used. In Arthur's curious system of logic the writing of a two guinea review article somehow entirely wiped out the fact that a week previously he had stolen ten pounds from a charity.

He accepted the hostile armistice with his wife partly because he was a moral coward and it was easier to forget things and just go on living; but mostly because he had now reached the stage where nothing else mattered to him except one woman. More strongly than ever he felt, and gloried in, the certainty of being obsessed by Valerie Stockley. In his study, when he should have been writing, he would sit for ten minutes at a time staring out of the window thinking about her or scribbling over and over again her telephone number—Witherley 32—on his piece of blotting-paper, doodling round it and elaborating every sort of fantasy of design which somehow matched the wild racing of his imagination.

He knew that she was away on holiday (with the ten pounds he had stolen for her!) but he did not know when she would be back. He guessed that she would be away a week but after seven days when he went in to Witherley and walked to Mill Cottage it was shut and there was no sign of life.

When he got back to Platts Jean knew where he had been and he knew that she knew but she said nothing, merely looking at him contemplatively and then turning away.

It was a strange moment for Arthur Engleton, that. At Mill Cottage when he knocked and there was no answer, when it was clear that nobody was there, he experienced an extraordinary mixture of feeling. The frustration of a hunger denied made him sick at heart; but for an instant he also felt something totally unexpected,

he felt a relief. Relief such as a man might who incredulously watches his gaoler walk away and leave the cell door open.

It was in this strangely mixed mood that he came back to Platts and when he saw Jean just for an instant something out of their first days together, something long forgotten, flashed back into his mind. He nearly said, "*For God's sake save me from this woman,*" but the words would not come; already the moment of frightened vision which suggested them was passing and when she gave him that contemptuous look and turned away it vanished altogether. But just for that instant he knew that he might possibly have escaped; now he knew that he couldn't.

Two days after that Jean heard again from Ursula Hinds and announced that she was going to spend a day in London.

"I'm quite sure you'll be all right here," she said. "You can always go down to Witherley."

"I shan't go down to Witherley. I've too much work to do."

Jean laughed.

On the afternoon of the day on which Jean went to London, Arthur walked out of the stationer's shop in the market square of Witherley. He had bought some foolscap paper and was just about to set off for Mill Cottage.

At the shop entrance he almost collided with Valerie Stockley.

She stopped and looked at him, enlarging her eyes in her odd way and smiling slowly.

"You were coming to see me?"

"I didn't know if you'd be back."

"I got back yesterday. You didn't write to me."

"I didn't know your address."

"There would have been a letter waiting for me at the cottage."

"Letters can be dangerous; people read them."



She shrugged her shoulders. She didn't care about people who read letters.

"You were coming to see me?" she repeated.

"Yes. I was coming to see if you were there."

"Does *she* (the word was spat out with almost frightening venom) know you have come?"

"Jean's away. Up in London for the day. She won't be back till seven or so this evening."

"So you dare to take a day off."

"Don't be a fool."

She suddenly slipped an arm through his.

"Don't be cross, Arthur. I'm only teasing. I'll spend the whole afternoon with you—but not at Mill Cottage."

"Where then?"

"At Platts."

He stared at her.

"If we can't go to Platts we can't go anywhere."

"Why——" but having started the question he let it die away. "We shall have to hang about for the bus," he said.

"Why?"

"Because it doesn't go back for another hour or so at the earliest—that's one of the benefits of living out in a godforsaken spot like that."

"You ought to have a car."

"Perhaps you will lend me the money to buy one."

She squeezed his arm and pointed across the square.

Hurd's Garage  
Taxis for Hire

George Hurd, who knew Mrs. Stockley well and thought she was a queer sort of customer, had a car available and within a few minutes they were bowling along Marsh Road.

Valerie and Arthur sat in the back close together, her thigh pressed hard against his. When they approached

the drive entrance she leant forward and said, "Drive right in; right up to the front door."

On his way back to the garage George Hurd reflected several things: first, that you saw some funny things all right, driving a taxi; second, that it was none of his business anyway; third, that he was mighty glad he didn't have a woman like that messing about with his affairs. . . .

Just before Arthur opened the front door Valerie said: "I wonder what will happen this time when I go in."

"You don't believe any of that nonsense, do you?"

They stepped over the threshold and waited and nothing happened. Only a dead silence. Then the woman raised her head as she had done once before and called out:

"If there are any unquiet spirits in this house get to hell out of it and leave us alone to enjoy ourselves."

The words echoed round the hall and the heavy waiting silence settled down again.

"That's how much I believe or care about it," she laughed. "What I say is you make your own life if you've got enough in you to do it."

Arthur shut the door behind them and looked at her. He had learnt that you could never tell with this woman. You could never be sure that she would not suddenly turn cold on you, ride away laughingly into small talk and nonsense and leave you high and dry, frustrated. Which amused her.

This time it was not like that. Not now, up here, in Platts. Now she wanted the act of love. She wanted to dominate by possession the man with whose destinies she was linking her own.

She tip-tilted her small head and looked at him out of those strange eyes.

"Upstairs, Arthur. Take me upstairs." She only whispered the words, but they ran sibilantly round the waiting silence of the house.

At the top of the stairs she felt again the sudden chill in the atmosphere as though a door had been left open and air had blown in from some other place.

But she was past caring about that now and when Arthur turned to the right to lead the way to his dressing-room she would not follow him but pulled him back.

He turned in surprise and alarm lest now at the last moment she should play one of her elusive tricks on him.

But it was not that.

When he looked at her inquiringly she shook her head.

"No. Not there. Not in your room. In the other bedroom. *In hers.*"

Arthur hesitated. There was something even in him which for a moment recoiled from the vehemence in the woman's voice.

"*In her room. In her bed.*"

And that was the way of it. Her love-making was as the man had already twice discovered it to be: violent, almost insatiable and conducted in silence.

Later she lay on the bed smoking; watching the smoke rings she was so good at blowing float lazily up to the ceiling; talking.

Now indeed she did talk. And the man, more her slave than ever, listened.

"You know she came to see me?"

Arthur said nothing and she concluded that he didn't know.

The naked woman laughed softly. "But of course she probably wouldn't say anything to you. You don't think she tells you half she does, do you?"

Arthur didn't reply to that. It was a new conception to him that Jean might hide things from him.

"She's got the money so why should she bother about you?"

"Why did she come down to see you?"

"Why do you think?"

"What happened?"

Valerie blew a smoke ring up into the air.

"I told her to get out. I told her I would have you, whenever I wanted you, and there was nothing she could do about it. That's true, isn't it?"

After a moment she repeated the query, insisting on an answer. "That's true, isn't it, Arthur?"

"Yes. It's true."

"So it wasn't much good her forbidding me to come up here to Platts, was it?"

"It doesn't look like it. For God's sake, can't we talk of something else?"

"Of course. Of you and me. She's only got the money, Arthur, because she's got the house."

"I know that."

"If you had the house, as the man ought to, you could sell it and have all the money we want."

After a silence Arthur asked quietly:

"And what about her?"

"If you get your hands on eight thousand pounds do you mind a great deal what happens to her?"

The man held out his hand and said: "Reach me a cigarette."

She took a cigarette from a box by the bedside, lit it from her own, and put it into his mouth.

"When you get the house and the money"—she whispered—"it's you and me and nobody else. There won't be anybody else."

When they finally left the bedroom it was late afternoon and in the corridor outside it was half dark. Arthur turned down the light switch by the door but instantly the woman put out her hand and knocked it up again.

"I like the half dark," she said. "Take out that bulb, Arthur. Reach up and take it out."

Obediently he stretched up and took out the bulb above their heads and she said: "If you do that the corridor must be in darkness, mustn't it. Let's walk along it."

When they had gone half a dozen paces she suddenly turned, and without any warning, flung her weight against him.

Taken completely unawares the man lost his balance and was thrown against the wall. But not against the wall itself, as the harshness of metal on his shoulder blade told him, against the gate of the lift.

For a second he was almost alarmed by the suddenness and swiftness of what had happened and alarm made him angry.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded. "I'd have been down the damned thing if the gates had been open."

"*And it could have been open,*" the woman whispered very quietly, standing stock still now in that darkened corridor and facing him; "*it could very easily have been open. Couldn't it?*"

## CHAPTER XV

JEAN HAD warned him that she would not be back till late that evening, and that he must fend for himself for an evening meal.

"Late" meant that she would catch the last train from London which got into Witherley at two minutes to ten; as this was too late for any bus service she would have to take one of the taxis that normally stood outside the station waiting for casual hire. She would reach Platts about a quarter past ten.

The man sitting in the darkening drawing-room glanced at the clock. He could only just distinguish its hands but he didn't want to switch on the light. The time was almost eight o'clock so that he had more than two hours yet. He turned on the radio, not bothering to select a

programme; when the antiquated set had warmed up the noise of a band playing nostalgic dance tunes began to come into the room.

The man sat there, not exactly listening but letting the sound be a background to his thoughts and staring across the steadily darkening room.

It was raining outside. A cold, wet night. The lances of rain being driven noisily against the window panes emphasised the quietness within the house. A quietness which he could somehow feel in spite of the strident wireless.

He was thinking—but he would not himself face the thoughts that he was thinking; he would not pull them out into the open and examine them; he was content not to; he was content to leave them unacknowledged in the dark background of his mind.

Yet real; urgently real.

Once when there was a pause in the wireless programme he thought he heard a movement in the hall. A sound difficult to diagnose; perhaps only the suggestion of a sound. Yet something. Under his breath he cursed at the house, trying to persuade himself that he didn't believe there was anything odd about it. He was glad when the dance music started raucously again from the radio. This time with singing. An off-beat, deliberately husky, synthetically sexy, sort of voice.

*"Anything you can do  
I can do better.  
I can do anything better than you."*

the woman sang, and for a moment the man was scared by the unexpected appositeness of it.

But scared only for a moment. Then he laughed. It could be an omen, a good omen, hearing her song like that just when he was sitting there waiting—waiting to get ready.



"There's food in the larder," Jean had said and presently the man got up and went towards the larder to see what was there, not so much from hunger as from a desire to have something to do. Something to fill up the vacuum of waiting.

He left the drawing-room door open behind him and the radio playing loudly. It was a sort of comfort to hear the cheap sentimental music blaring out in that cold, empty, unfriendly house.

It smelt dank, too. Damp. This was something he didn't remember having noticed before; certainly not so prominently. "God, what a house," he said aloud, "what a morgue."

Then thinking of the appropriateness of that last word he laughed quietly . . .

*" . . . what a morgue."*

He laughed; but for a moment the word sobered him. Before long it would be a fact and not only a word. There would be an inquest. In cases of accident there was always an inquest, surely? He thought so anyway and he would be prepared for it. And before the inquest, the moment of identification.

He was prepared for that. He was prepared for everything. It was the thing done on the spur of the moment, in some sudden flare up of temper or surge of fear that was dangerous. You didn't have time to think then. You forgot things. You overlooked things. Simple, elementary things which gave you away. Things which you didn't forget or overlook when you had plenty of time, a whole evening to lay your plans.

When he reached the larder door the wireless stopped—a pause in the programme, he supposed—and the sudden silence in the house was unpleasant.

In the larder there was cold food, a small pork pie; some vegetables over from the day before; a tart of some kind; some cheese.

He didn't feel particularly hungry and, after a moment's

hesitation, cut himself a slice of the pork pie and a piece of cheese, ignoring the rest.

With these two pieces of food on a plate he went back to the drawing-room. The radio was still silent and in a moment he saw why. The plug had pulled out of the wall switch and lay on the floor some five or six inches away from the wall.

He stared at it and felt the hairs on the nape of his neck move slightly.

He was afraid and in his fear a sudden wave of anger against the house rose up in him. He swore obscenely at it and at all the influences in it, calling on the day when he would sell it and be rid of it.

He forced himself to handle the plug and put it back into the switch and was grateful for the reassuring sound of the radio music.

There was half a bottle of whisky in the room and from it he now poured himself out a generous drink. But he reminded himself that however badly the craving might come on him he must keep a useful amount in the bottle for later on . . .

*"And when your wife came in did she have anything to drink?"*

*"Yes, sir, she asked for a whisky."*

*"Would you describe the amount she had as a lot?"*

*"Well she was obviously tired and she had two pretty large drinks."*

*"Was this more than she normally took?"*

*"Yes, a good deal."*

He had prepared himself for this sort of thing by thinking forward, by anxious pre-thought, but you couldn't be too careful; there were such things as post-mortems; doctors reported on what was to be found in stomachs; if there was no alcohol there then that might well be the fatal first crack in his story. And he didn't intend to have any fatal first crack.

Often enough people weren't suspicious at all until

some one little snag made them begin to think. Then they were as suspicious as hell.

The radio programme came to an end; there were some announcements and a talk started. He didn't listen but it was something to fill up time, to prevent the house being silent.

He had switched the light on by now and he sat there staring at the single red bar of the electric fire, and sipping at his drink.

Occasionally he glanced at the clock. The time was nearing nine. "Coming up for nine" he thought and realised suddenly the significance of the words. "*Christ Almighty*," he chided himself, half aloud, "*I mustn't start to think like that—but it is at nine they do it to you, isn't it?*"

Nine came and passed. Fragments of the news half stuck in his brain. Something political. A railway accident. A man had died worth millions who had started with nothing . . . "He made his way" was one of the things said about him. The listening man approved of the phrase. The world fell into two classes: the suckers and those who made their way. And to make your way you had to have the *nous* to know what to do and the guts to do it. Given these two things you got away from the crowd like a jockey seeing his moment, seizing it and sending his horse clear of the ruck behind.

The clock hands moved intolerably slowly and he swore silently at them, and at time itself which would not bend to his plans. Now he wanted it over and done with. A man waiting in the trenches to go over the top wants the horrible moment to come. Waiting is intolerable.

At nine forty-five he went out into the hall and stood behind the staircase looking through the lattice metal work of the lift door.

There was no cage there, just the dark shaft and the bottom of the dark shaft.

He stared at it in a moment of fascinated horror that nearly undid him.

*What did a body look like, he wondered, after falling, after being pushed violently down from the floor above?*

He went upstairs and put on the landing light. The radio was still sounding from the drawing-room and he wondered wryly whether the plug would be pulled out again.

But obviously it wasn't for the voices kept on floating up the stairs and he could still hear them faintly as he stood by the lift door examining it.

He undid the lock and concertinaed the metal door back into the fully open position, pushing it back hard so as to gain the maximum amount of space.

After looking at it reflectively for a moment he walked to the end of the corridor and switched off the light. He stood there looking down the corridor and now in the darkness it was virtually impossible to tell if the lift gate was shut or not.

If you were walking along the corridor expecting the gate to be shut it would never enter your head that it wouldn't be shut. . . .

*"How do you account for the fact that the lift gate was not shut?"*

*"I can't account for it. My wife said she was going up and I said I would follow in a few minutes. The radio was on and I wanted to listen to it. Presently I heard a noise and went out to see what it was and——"*

*"Was the lift gate shut when you had last seen it?"*

*"It was always shut."*

*"How could it have been open on this occasion?"*

*"I just don't know, except——"*

*"Except what, Mr. Engleton? I realise that this is very distressing for you, of course, but if there is any light at all that you can throw on the matter——"*

*"I don't really believe in it myself exactly; but my wife used to. She used to say that things got moved in the house. Furniture, and so on. I don't know——"*

He laughed. Aloud. Pressing the lift door back hard

once more with his hand to make doubly sure that it was as wide open as possible. That was the way to do it. Put the blame on the house. If the house liked playing tricks let it bear the blame for playing one too many. . . .

When he got back to the drawing-room the radio was still playing. The plug had not been pulled out and in an obscure way he took this as a sign. As a sort of minor triumph.

At ten he went upstairs again; on the corridor upstairs he peered for a moment down the lift shaft into which his own shadow was thrown in a grotesque distortion and then, walking to the head of the stairs, reached above him and took the light bulb out of its socket.

The landing was in darkness, save for what light came up the stairs from the hall. It was in silence, save for some tinkling music that the radio had now switched to and a woman's voice singing:

"I can't give you anything but love, baby."

The bulb must be thrown away in the dustbin, he knew. Thrown so that it broke.

*"Is there a light on the landing upstairs?"*

*"There is one; but on that particular night it wasn't working. The bulb had 'gone' the day before."*

*"Did your wife know this?"*

*"Oh, yes; it was she who told me about it."*

*"Did she expect you to replace the bulb?"*

*"No. She definitely said she was going to."*

The stairs were now in half darkness and on his way down something that wasn't dark caught his eye. He nearly missed it, thinking as he was of other things, but he saw it and bent down to see what it was.

It was a scarf. When his fingers touched it he got a peculiar sensation. Even before getting it into the full light of the hall he knew what it was. It was the yellow scarf which Valerie Stockley often wore. "Always have a touch of yellow" was one of her sayings.

It must have been lying there all the time; clearly

it must have been; and on his various journeys up and down the stairs he had just happened to miss seeing it.

But he was shaken.

If he *hadn't* found it.

If, if *afterwards* somebody had found it with "V. Stockley" in a woven name tag in one corner of it . . .

" . . . *was Mrs. Stockley in the habit of visiting you at Platts, Mr. Engleton?* "

It could have been the fatal first crack in his story again.

He folded the yellow scarf carefully and put it in a side pocket. It was safest there and would have to be dealt with later. Meanwhile he must make sure and now, time, having lagged intolerably all the evening, was suddenly galloping. It was after ten and there was very little time.

He swore blasphemously as he hurried up the stairs again, along the dark passage to the bedroom.

He had switched on the light and surveyed the room in which as it now seemed to him an æon ago he and the woman who had come to possess him body and soul had almost savagely performed the act of love.

Was there anything she had left there? A handkerchief, a piece of jewellery, a hairpin, even?

He searched intently, indeed feverishly, and could see nothing. From the door he took one long, last comprehensive look, almost reluctant to go. But go he had to for he knew that it must be nearly a quarter past the hour.

He switched off the light and hurried downstairs.

In the drawing-room he helped himself to another drink, but only a small one, making sure to keep plenty in the half-bottle, and then turned down the volume of the radio so as to be able to hear the taxi come up the drive.

When he heard it he didn't go to open the front door. He started to go, moved by heaven, or perhaps hell, knows what perversion of feeling, but he stopped himself.



Normally he would never go to meet Jean like that and above all things he must make the evening seem normal to her. There must be nothing unusual to put her on her guard. Nothing, however trivial, out of the ordinary.

So when she came into the drawing-room she found him sitting by the radio with a glass in his hand. And that was usual enough.

"God almighty how usual," she thought, taking in the scene and her husband's unenthusiastic welcome of her.

"Had a good day?" he asked, looking up.

"Yes. I enjoyed it."

"How's what's her name—Ursula Hinds, isn't it?"

"She's in good form. She knows that man Thorpe. He had lunch with us."

"Thorpe?"

"John Thorpe. He chipped in and told that old hag Mrs. Hardcastle off when I went back to the Venice to get that letter for you."

"Thank God we don't have to worry about that lot any more. What did you do with Ursula Hinds?"

"We did a flick together."

"Any good?"

"Fair: I must say I feel tired."

He jumped up.

"Have a drink?"

"I'd love one."

He went to the side table and mixed a whisky and soda, carrying it to her where she stood in front of the fire.

"You're very attentive to me all of a sudden, Arthur."

"My God, I'm only fixing you a drink."

"I take it you've had one or two yourself in the course of the evening?"

"Naturally. What do you expect me to do if you go off and leave me alone? Sit here and sing hymns or something?"

"This is a pretty strong whisky, isn't it?"

"I thought you said you were tired?"

"Um-um. Anything happened during the day? Anybody been here?"

He looked up quickly. "Anybody been here? Of course not. Who should have been here?"

"Somebody might call."

"Not in this god-forsaken out of the way place——"

"All right, all right, Arthur. I know what you think about Platts. Let's skip it for to-night. I feel too tired to argue anyway."

"Then why don't you go up to bed?"

"I'm going. But there's no desperate hurry is there?"

He bent and switched off the radio.

"That's not worth listening to anyway."

"Have you had it on all the evening?"

"Most of the time."

Jean drained her glass and put it down on the mantelshelf.

"Have another?"

"You're very free with your precious whisky."

He mumbled something about it being the best drink if you were really tired; but he was shaken; he hadn't realised what a difficult thing it was simply to try to appear normal.

The moment you started trying the fact that you were trying became evident apparently.

He was relieved when his wife refused a second drink, and, picking up her handbag and her small hat which she had taken off and put on the back of a chair, said that she was going up to bed.

"Are you going to stay down here and listen to anything more on the wireless?" she asked.

"No. I'm coming up, too."

At the top of the stairs he sensed that she was feeling for the light switch and he heard the small noise it made as she pressed it down.

Nothing happened. Darkness. The man and the

woman, the would-be murderer and the woman he intended to kill, standing touching one another in the darkness. For a second the house was filled with a desperately intense silence.

Then the woman broke it trivially.

"The bulb must have gone," she said. "What a nuisance."

"I'll put another one in to-morrow," the man replied with a constriction of his throat. He had suddenly realised that the bulb, whole and intact, was still in his pocket. The business of finding Valerie Stockley's scarf on the stairs had made him forget about it. *Forget the bulb!* He had imagined that he was being so far-seeing and careful and he had forgotten the bulb! *God Almighty*, he thought, *what else have I forgotten, what else will perhaps be found?*

But by now the woman was walking along the dark corridor and there was no time to reflect on what might have been forgotten or not allowed for.

Now what was going to be done must be done quickly.

He hurried after the woman drawing level alongside her before she had gone many paces. He kept his left hand brushing against the wall at shoulder height, a picture hung there and he knew that when he felt it three steps more would bring them both opposite the now unprotected opening of the lift shaft.

She couldn't make out why he was trying to keep level with her in the narrow corridor and not walking behind, but she had only begun her slightly petulant comment about this when, in the dark, the trailing fingers of his left hand touched the picture frame . . .

Three paces, perhaps a second and a half of time, and he suddenly lurched to the right, throwing all his weight against the woman and knocking her completely off her balance.

"Arthur, for God's sake be careful! What on earth are you doing?"

He mumbled something about being sorry and having slipped.

"Are you drunk or something?"

"I'm sorry, I slipped. My ankle sort of gave way. I've half twisted it."

He could make out now, even in the dark, that she was flat up against the gate of the lift which was carefully shut across the opening.

"If the lift gate had been open I would have gone straight down the shaft and broken my neck most likely."

"Don't be silly," he managed to say thickly, "it never is open."

But half an hour before, twenty minutes before, it had been open. He had opened it himself and left it pressed back. . . .

## CHAPTER XVI

"WHAT HAPPENED?"

In Mill Cottage Valerie Stockley sat in her sweater and slacks curled up in the arm-chair, the thin blue smoke curling away from the cigarette between her lips.

"What happened?"

Arthur Engleton was sitting opposite her. It was between two and three in the afternoon. He looked like a man recovering from a very thick night. And he acted like one, saying: "Give me a drink."

She looked at him almost contemptuously for a second or two and then reached out to a bottle on a table behind her.

The movement drew her already close-fitting sweater even more tightly across the mounds of her breasts and Arthur watched her greedily.

"Help yourself," she said handing him the bottle, "the glasses are over in the corner and there's a siphon there somewhere, too."

When he had mixed his drink and had taken the first reassuring gulp of it she asked for the third time:

"What happened?"

"Well, I fixed everything——"

Valerie laughed. "It looks like it."

"No. Listen, I did——"

"Then what happened? Tell me."

"I thought it all out and I fixed all the details. She wasn't due back at the station till a minute or so after ten and couldn't be at Platts till a quarter past. At ten o'clock I went upstairs and took the bulb out of the landing light——"

"What did you do with it?"

"As a matter of fact I put it in my pocket and forgot it."

"*Forgot it?*"

"Yes. Damned silly, wasn't it?"

"How could you forget it?"

Arthur laughed. "Something caught my eye as I was coming down the stairs. Something you might be interested in."

He put his hand in his side pocket, pulled out the yellow scarf and tossed it over to her.

She picked it up and examined it incredulously. "Where did you get this?"

"I've just told you. On the stairs at Platts. You must have dropped it on your way down."

She turned the scarf over in her hands without saying anything.

"So it doesn't look as though I'm the only b.f. in this affair," Arthur went on. "Suppose, just suppose, everything had gone as we planned and suppose I hadn't spotted that scarf. It might have been up in the bedroom somewhere, on the floor. And somebody, one of the

people who come prying round after this sort of thing, found it. What then?"

"People won't come prying round," Valerie said slowly, "Not if you take care and do things properly."

"No? Maybe you're right. But finding that scarf shook me a bit all the same, I can tell you. As a matter of fact I remembered I still had the bulb in my pocket when—when we both went upstairs together a bit later. She went to turn on the light and of course it wouldn't work. So I said the bulb must have gone and I'd fix it in the morning and we started to walk along the corridor together. In the dark."

She was watching him intently now; her eyes fixed on him; her full lips slightly open.

"And?" she breathed.

"If the lift gate had been open she would have gone smack down the shaft."

"If it had been open?"

"It wasn't. It was shut."

"But——"

Arthur shook his head angrily and took another mouthful of his drink.

"Don't ask me. I don't know. A door can swing to even if you think you have propped it open and I suppose a lift gate like that one can creep back shut."

"It had been open?"

"I'm not a complete bloody fool, am I?"

Valerie tilted back her head and smiled irritatingly up at the ceiling. She was bitterly disappointed at what was being told to her, but she could see that for the moment there was nothing she could do about it. It must be accepted. But at least she could have the pleasure of goading Arthur Engleton about it.

"I don't know about that, Arthur," she said. "You seem to have made a pretty good mess of this anyway."

"I didn't make a mess of anything."

"Then why aren't we celebrating?"



"I fixed everything; the lift gate and everything."

"It looks like it."

"You're damned smart and clever aren't you?"

"If you opened the lift gate properly it would have still been open."

"Yes? Well, it wasn't. And do you know what I think about it?"

She eyed him speculatively through the drifting smoke of her cigarette.

"What, Arthur?"

"I think something, somebody if you like, in that damned house shut it."

"You're getting scared of the house now, are you?"

"Not necessarily. Not scared, exactly. You can think a thing exists without being scared of it. I say to hell with the house and everything in it—but I believe there is something in it all the same."

"So do I."

She said the words in such a peculiar way that he looked at her, waiting for her to go on.

"So do I," she repeated. "There are some places, Arthur, *where things happen*. Don't you feel that? Some places you go to give you a feeling. You think *something has happened here*. And when something has already happened something can happen again. That's why we are going to be able to do what we want to do at Platts."

Arthur Engleton nodded and held out his glass to be replenished. She hesitated a fraction of a second before tilting the bottle and he noticed the hesitation.

"I say to hell with the house and everything in it," he repeated, watching the amber liquid run into his out-held glass. "I've shouted it aloud in the place and so have you. You're as much in this as I am. If they don't like what I'm saying and doing they don't like what you're saying and doing either."

"They?"

"The people who move chairs about and pull out plugs and shut lift gates."

"Do you think there is another world, Arthur?"

"I——" He didn't finish the sentence and said instead: "I'm only interested in this one. When I'm dead I'm dead. Napoo. *Fini*. Whilst I'm alive I want to be alive. I want to be able to kick life, not get kicked by it. I want money."

She laughed again in her irritating way and said lightly:

"Then you'll have to do something about it, won't you?"

"I've shown I'm willing to, haven't I?"

"Lots of people are willing in a general sort of way. You've got to *do*."

"I can't help things going wrong, accidents."

He had drained his second drink, a small one, quickly and now held out his glass again.

Valerie looked at him levelly and made no effort to move. At length she said:

"I'm not going to give you any more whisky, Arthur. Not at three o'clock in the afternoon."

He flushed with rage and asked:

"Are you setting yourself up as judge of what I'm supposed to do and not supposed to do?"

"I wouldn't waste time judging you, Arthur."

"Don't forget you're in this thing with me. Up to your eyes in it."

"If I weren't in it with you, you wouldn't get very far with it."

"We don't seem to have got all that far as it is," he said with sudden explosive violence. He held out his glass. "Just pour a good-sized tot in that, will you, or I'll beat the living daylights out of you. I'm quite capable of doing that you know."

They stared at one another and Valerie suddenly broke into an easy laugh. He couldn't tell whether she was

afraid of him or not. She didn't sound it. And he couldn't be sure how she was going to answer him for at that precise moment, with the sound of her laughter still in the air, a knock came at the cottage door.

This had never happened before that anybody called whilst he was with her and for a fraction of a second she seemed disconcerted.

Then she said quietly and easily: "Sit tight and I'll see who it is."

But in Mill Cottage seeing who was at the front door involved letting whoever was there also see who was in the room, for the door opened directly into the living-room.

When Valerie opened the door Arthur could see beyond her the helmet and the blue uniform of a policeman.

For a fraction of a second he felt frightened. The empty feeling inside him lasted the smallest possible fragment of time, but it happened. It was there. It was real and it was unpleasant.

"Excuse me, Madam, but are you Mrs. Stockley? I understand that last Friday in the High Street there was some question——"

The previous week Valerie had been engaged in a dispute with a motorist on the pedestrian crossing in the middle of Witherley High Street and had complained to the policeman on the spot who had come up to see what the trouble was. She had been angry at the time but had now all but forgotten the incident but it seemed that the report had filtered through the official machine and was producing results.

The policeman asked questions, wrote down what Valerie told him and read it over carefully to her all at an unhurried pace.

When he had finally gone and they had the room to themselves again she said:

"What a nice man."

"I could have done without him," Arthur said.

"Just for the first second, when you first saw him at the door, what did you think?"

Arthur flushed slightly and said:

"It isn't that. But there's no point in people seeing us together more than necessary at the moment."

She resumed her position, half seated, half lying on the sofa and seemed to have forgotten their dispute of a quarter of an hour before.

"Mix yourself a drink, Arthur, and sit down here by me."

When he had done this she said: "We needn't mind being seen together if you listen to me and do what I say. Just because things have gone wrong once it doesn't mean that they'll go wrong the next time. There'll be another chance, Arthur—and I'll tell you when to take it."

## CHAPTER XVII

JEAN'S VISIT to London to see Ursula Hinds was not to be repeated for some time. Even had she felt the inclination to go up to London again there was the ever stringent question of money to be considered. She was fairly certain that Arthur was in one of his fortunate periods and was getting a number of reviews and commissioned articles to do, but he seldom volunteered any information about his work and she didn't ask him directly for money if it could be avoided. The outcome was nearly always too unpleasant.

But she thought a good deal about her day with Ursula.

They had met as arranged at the Danish restaurant in Wigmore Street. Ursula, as usual, had been late and full of slightly mysterious doings and plans.

"Do you mind if a man has lunch with us? We can

talk afterwards. I couldn't get out of it really. And he's terribly nice."

And before any further explanations could be given the "terribly nice" man had arrived.

John Thorpe.

He stared at Jean for a moment unbelievably and then with a broad smile said: "But how nice to see you again."

"You don't know one another!" Ursula exclaimed.

But indeed they did. And it was all explained to Ursula and there was a good deal of laughter about it and the ice was broken straight away.

And of course the fact that Jean had inherited a house in the country was mentioned and when it came to light that Platts was near Witherley John Thorpe said he was interested because he had been brought up in Essex himself and had an aunt still living not twenty miles from Witherley whom he still occasionally visited.

"Next time I go and see the old lady I'll make a point of passing through Witherley," he said, "and I'll call in and see you and your house if I may."

And when he had to leave them directly after lunch he held her hand—or did she only imagine it?—a fraction longer than was necessary and said:

"I meant what I said about dropping in to see you, if it's all right with you?"

"Of course it is."

Jean had thought over that luncheon many times since but she had not heard anything from John Thorpe nor had she been up to London again to see Ursula Hinds. It was true that the question of expense deterred her, but it was also true that she felt an extraordinary reluctance to leave Platts if only for a day.

The strength of this feeling surprised even Jean herself; it was as though some invisible bond held her to the place; as though, the phrase came into her head one night when she lay awake—she had bouts of sleeping

badly—staring at the faint starlight of the sky outside, “As though the place were linked up with my destiny somehow; as though things had to be settled here.”

Perhaps it was there at that cold, realistic moment of the dark morning a full hour before dawn, perhaps it was then that there first came into her mind the thought that afterwards never left her, the thought that once started would never be quiet, that worked like an irritant at the back of all else that she was thinking.

She began to recall, not with conscious deliberation but simply as the thoughts flowed into her mind, the incidents of the evening when she had come back to Platts from her day in London with Ursula Hinds.

And out of nowhere, unprompted and unbidden, the idea suddenly materialised within her mind: “*when he stumbled it wasn’t an accident; Arthur tried to kill me.*”

The idea, when it first came to her, was so stark and startling that she sat up in bed now fully awake and stared about her. The room was very dark but there was enough starlight to make the outline of the windows discernible and nearer at hand the yellowy-green hands and numbers of her bedside clock glowed phosphorescently.

Somewhere a board creaked but otherwise the house was dark and silent.

Yet vibrant with active, strong and (the thought came to her for the first time) perhaps evil life.

*He tried to kill me.*

Fantastic thought, she told herself; but somehow she knew that the really fantastic thing was how a thing can exist as large as life, or death, and you can fail to see it; then suddenly a simple sentence is said or imagined and all of a sudden the truth of it becomes obvious and, even if unprovable, undeniable.

*Arthur tried to kill me.*

She lay back on her pillow and went over act by act the happenings of her arrival that night.

Arthur drinking and listening to the radio when she



came in; nothing abnormal there; but then he had been unusually attentive in getting a drink for her, generally if she wanted anything she had to get it for herself; and when he had brought her a whisky it had been an uncommonly strong one.

Was there enough there, was there *anything* there, to be suspicious about?

No. Not looking at it all from one angle. But hold shot silk up one way and it looks green; twist it and it can be red.

The bulb in the landing light? No reason why it shouldn't have "gone" normally; yet if what had come into her mind *was* true then the business of the bulb fitted in.

Easy to remove a bulb, easy; and convenient, if you want a dark passage to walk along.

And Arthur's sudden sideways slump against her opposite the lift opening. Directly opposite the lift opening. Something he had said about his ankle. Anyone can stumble. Especially in the dark. And yet——

And yet she was certain suddenly in that cold, dark hour of the morning, she was certain that he had tried to kill her. Or nearly certain.

When day came, after she had slept again, and with day the ordinary normal process of living, the trivialities of existence which were reassuring precisely because they were trivialities and life was seen to consist of them, when all this occurred the thought of murder became slightly unreal, the thought that the man sitting opposite her at the breakfast table reading the sporting page of the *Daily Mail* had tried to kill her attracted an air of the fantastical to itself.

And yet——

She kept a covert watch on him across the table.

She had thought that she knew this man—egotistical, a self-deceiver, a liar.

But did she know him? Was it possible to push mean-

ness and deception a little beyond the ordinary limits until something tragic came of them? Presumably it must be or murders would not occur. The worst murderer in the world, she supposed, must have sat just like this eating his cornflakes, reading his daily paper at breakfast——

“What on earth are you staring at me for?”

“Staring, Arthur? I wasn’t staring. I didn’t mean to, anyway. I was—nothing, just day-dreaming, I suppose.”

She was a little shaken by that. Arthur was quick to notice things. Little things. Too quick. One thing was quite certain—she mustn’t let him see that she suspected anything.

Somehow she felt instinctively that she would be safer if he hadn’t an inkling that she was suspicious. That way she could watch him and be on her guard.

It had never occurred to her to leave him and Platts. The house had an appeal for her which equally she could not define or resist.

As the days went by after her visit to see Ursula Hinds in London she alternated between being almost certain that she was imagining a nightmare and being quite certain that she wasn’t.

And she discovered a curious thing, that out of some dark recesses of her mind, came a kind of pungency, like the edge that danger gives to living, from the realisation that what she feared might be true.

She began to learn how fundamentally true accepted clichés can be; “horrible fascination,” she must have read in novels a score of times. She had never before realised that fascination could be horrible and a horror fascinating.

But a week, ten days, a fortnight went by and she saw no sign from Arthur to justify what by now she was beginning not to believe.

She was pretty certain that he was seeing a good deal

of Valerie Stockley but she knew that she could do nothing about this. There had been Valerie Stockleys before in his life and he had got over them.

Every afternoon she busied herself in the garden building a rockery. The weather was kind; golden September days; and she was able to work without interruption from rain.

She didn't know whether the spirits of Platts would approve of innovations in the garden or not. She didn't even know if they took cognisance of anything outside the house; but the large stones that she laboriously gathered from various parts of the garden were not mischievously interfered with and so she assumed that she was not offending anybody.

There were times when she was extremely lonely. Since the episode of the flag day money she had not seen much of Mrs. Dunning. Jean had put things right, of course, but she had not been able to do so immediately and obviously a suspicion had been created that there had been some funny business.

Exactly what Mrs. Dunning thought about it Jean didn't know but she *did* know that the two of them hardly saw one another these days and she felt the loss of a friendship.

The letter from John Thorpe came as a complete surprise; her post was always a meagre one, a gardening catalogue; a circular; something from one of the local tradesmen, these were its normal constituents and she picked up the envelope in the unknown handwriting wonderingly.

"I told you I would be visiting my aunt at Brackstead fairly soon," Thorpe wrote, "and in fact I am motoring over to stay with her next Thursday. If I may I am going to take you at your word and look in and see you *en route*. I am going to take a chance and drop in about four o'clock for a cup of tea. I realise that I'm giving you next to no notice and of course if you have made other

plans or it doesn't suit you just drop me a line or ring me. . . ."

It was already Wednesday when the letter arrived so that had she wanted to put him off Jean would have had to telephone from the kiosk down the road; but, of course, she didn't want to put him off. She had been growing so lonely lately at Platts that the prospect of having a visitor was exciting.

Arthur, immersed as usual in the paper, had not noticed what the post had consisted of. At least she did not think that he had noticed, but looking at him steadily across the table she realised, for the fiftieth time, that it was extremely hard to be sure of what Arthur noticed and what he didn't notice.

As she studied that face, which for all its weakness had a streak of cruelty in it, Jean felt a slight shiver run down her spine.

She said nothing to him about John Thorpe's letter. She had actually opened her mouth to tell him about it and then changed her mind.

She had seen little enough, heaven knows, of John Thorpe so far but she wanted to keep him separate from the rest of her life.

Arthur's afternoon absences had lately included tea-time as often as not, and all she could do was to hope that on Thursday Valerie Stockley would offer him tea in Mill Cottage and he would accept.

A little bitterly she reflected that there was not much doubt about his acceptance of the offer if it were made.

Jean worked hard all that afternoon in the garden in an attempt to finish the rockery. Although it was a sunny day and warm in the sun, yet the wind was cold, coming over the flat eastern marsh lands and Jean went to bed aware of the irritating fact that she had caught a cold.

"Just when I wanted to look at my best for to-morrow," she told herself in annoyance, conscious that it was a long

time now since she had bothered about looking her best for anybody or anything.

She slept badly which was not unusual lately and lying in bed just before getting-up time assessed the matter of her cold.

It was true that she had one, but it was also true that it had not developed into something formidable as she had feared it might.

It would be a nuisance and no more. Meanwhile, there was John Thorpe's visit to look forward to and, in spite of her cold, she felt more cheerful than usual during the morning round of household duties.

Lunch had provided one of those stupid quarrels with Arthur which she dreaded and hated, all the more so because she had a strong suspicion that they were occasions which he neither dreaded nor hated.

It began with a moody outburst from him about the warmed-up meat dish which, with bread and cheese, was to be the meal.

"For God's sake, is this the best you can do?"

Soon after the discussion went the well known, well worn way: food, like everything else in life cost money; she had been supporting the brunt of the household expenses since coming to Platts; she couldn't go on doing it for ever. Not for any longer, in fact.

If he wanted better food he must give her some money.

"Sell the damned house."

She didn't even bother to follow up that stale topic.

"I suppose it's no good asking you to be reasonable, Arthur, but even you must surely see that we can't run any sort of home, anywhere, without money. You're doing better lately and you ought to be giving me more."

"How do you know I'm doing better?"

"I can tell you are from the letters you get and so on. I know you must be doing more reviews and articles."

"I didn't realise that you pried into my post every

morning. I don't concern myself with what letters you get."

Jean smiled; which annoyed her husband still more. He couldn't see anything funny in that particular remark.

Later she asked him casually:

"Will you be out to tea this afternoon, Arthur?"

He lowered the paper and looked at her.

"What if I am?"

"I was merely wondering."

"Yes. I probably shall be. Have you any objection?"

She looked at him steadily and answered:

"It wouldn't make any difference if I had, would it?"

He gave one of his unpleasant laughs and said:

"No. Not much."

The day was as sunny as the previous one had been but the wind was no longer in the east and in spite of her cold Jean was working in the garden when a small grey saloon came up the drive just after four o'clock and stopped in front of the house.

John Thorpe got out and was obviously impressed as he looked round at the garden.

When Jean had come up and the conventional sentences had been exchanged, he said, "What a nice place you've got here."

"You like Platts?" she asked him.

John considered the house.

"Well, actually it's slightly Victorian for my taste——"

"It's ugly—in a way."

"But only in a way."

"That's exactly what I feel. You *can't* call the house hateful or charming, but it has got an attraction of its own. I love it."

"I can understand that."

"But you don't have to be polite. You needn't pretend to like it if you don't. And with Platts the great thing is to find out if the house is going to like you!"

But as they passed through the front doorway into the



hall the house gave no obvious sign of disapproval and Jean concluded that John was accepted as a welcome guest.

They had tea in the drawing-room, Jean excusing Arthur's absence with what she hoped was a convincing explanation about his having to go out to an engagement already entered into. Her only real concern was that he should not, on this particular occasion, get tired of Valerie Stockley and decide to come home for tea. It would not have surprised her if he had; life had not encouraged her to expect that it would be kind to her even in the little things.

But Arthur did not come back, and the two human beings sitting and talking together in the drawing-room of the watching and approving house gradually began to find their conversation getting below the usual conventional surface and deepening a little.

Neither could have explained exactly how it began, nor have pin-pointed the precise moment at which they both began to realise that what was being said might matter; but for all that it happened.

When John Thorpe said, with a laugh:

"Well, you're not worried by the Mrs. Hardcastles of life here," and Jean answered simply "no" there was certainly nothing in the words themselves to make him so certain that even if Mrs. Hardcastle was a thing of the past there was *certainly something* that this attractive woman was worried by.

She looked tired and drawn.

"I suppose you do a lot of work in the garden?"

"A good deal. For one thing we can't afford a gardener, of course, and if I didn't do something the place would be like a wilderness. Actually it is rather like one now, I'm afraid."

"Nonsense. It gives every impression of being well looked after."

"It's nice to hear somebody appreciating it."

"You've got a cold, Mrs. Engleton."

"Yes. Sorry. Am I horribly snuffly? It was the east wind yesterday, I think. I'm afraid I must look awful."

He smiled at her. "I didn't say that."

"And I'm not sleeping particularly well, which doesn't help."

"Why aren't you sleeping well?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's the sort of thing that goes in fits and starts isn't it? Anyway, not to worry, I've got some perfectly marvellous pills. One of them absolutely puts me out."

"I'm not a great believer in sleeping pills."

"You would be—if you couldn't sleep."

"Maybe; tell me——" John Thorpe seemed to find it difficult to express himself. At all events he let his voice trail away.

"Tell you what?" Jean prompted.

"Well, I was going to say something and then I was afraid that it might sound too prying, too personal. But somehow—it's a little difficult to explain but we seem to have got on well together and I feel that maybe we don't have to be too formal, you and I——"

Jean shook her head. "We don't."

"I just wondered if you had really got rid of all the Mrs. Hardcastle trouble. I wondered if you were happy; that was all."

"Perhaps human beings aren't meant to be happy."

"I think that's a silly thing to say. It isn't a question of what we are meant or not meant to be. It's a question of what we can manage for ourselves. People make their own lives, I'm a great believer in that."

"I suppose I am too, really; and if you make a mistake, if you start off along a wrong path it isn't always easy to get back again."

"No."

After a pause he asked gently: "What was your mistake? Coming to this house?"

"No, no. Not that. It certainly wasn't that. What on earth makes you ask that about Platts?"

"I can feel an—I don't know quite how to describe it—I can feel an *atmosphere* about it somehow."

Jean smiled. "What sort of atmosphere? Friendly?"

"I think so. It isn't easy to define it at first, to be quite sure what one does feel. But I can feel *something*. I thought maybe you could too and that it was affecting you."

"I *can* feel something. But it doesn't make me unhappy. On the contrary I regard the house as my friend."

"And your enemy?"

Jean flushed slightly and answered after a pause:

"I didn't exactly say that I had an enemy."

"No, I'm sorry. I'm putting words in your mouth. If the house is too big for you and running it too much of a burden you could always sell it, and for a pretty good price I would imagine."

Jean shook her head.

"That's what Arthur wants to do, sell it. But I never will."

"Your husband wants to sell?"

"Yes, he's always worrying me about it."

"Why does he want to sell the place?"

"Oh, I suppose, because to get his hands on actual cash, money, means more to him than anything else in the world."

John Thorpe looked at her for a moment and then, nodding quietly, said: "I see."

The bitterness in her voice made it pretty plain to him where the real cause of her discontent and unhappiness lay.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have said that——" she said.

He stretched out a steady, firm hand and, for a moment, laid it on hers.

"Don't mind what you say to me; and don't say anything at all if you would rather not; but if you want

to talk, if you feel it would help you to say it all aloud to somebody, why, go ahead and I'll listen only too gladly; and if I can help I will, I think you know that."

So bit by bit, sentence by sentence, Jean unburdened herself of the story of her disastrous marriage to Arthur. The deceptions, the shifts, the subterfuges, they all came out.

"Don't think I'm saying it's all his fault," she said. "It isn't. When a marriage goes wrong there's always some blame at least on both sides. I know that. Only, with Arthur, there's no getting back after mistakes; there's nothing to build on; I simply cannot rely on one single sentence he says or a promise he gives."

She spoke about the house and its peculiarities and, seeing a look of polite incredulity for a moment on John's face, laughed.

"Naturally you don't quite believe what I'm telling you," she said. "I don't expect you to. I wouldn't have believed it myself before I came here. It just happens to be true, that's all. There is some sort of influence, you can call it a spirit or ghost or what you like, in the place which does things. It moves furniture and pulls out light plugs, things like that."

"What does your husband say to it all?"

"He thinks, or says he thinks, that it is all trickery and imagination."

"Have things got worse between you and him since coming to live here?"

"Yes, they have. I thought having a house of our own, a home, might make all the difference and that we might make a fresh start here at Platts. But it hasn't worked out like that. Arthur is going on as he always has done; at this very moment I am pretty sure he is having tea with somebody he finds more attractive than me and we never even began to get closer together here. In fact, at times, I am definitely afraid."

"Afraid? Physically afraid, you mean?"

"Arthur is the sort of man who might try to do

anything. He would brood over some plan or other and try any way of bringing it off, any way at all."

John Thorpe stared at her for a moment or two and then said slowly:

"I'm not sure that I quite understand you. Do you mean——?"

"I'm not sure that I quite understand myself," Jean cut in quickly. "Let's forget about it. You know how thoughts, black thoughts, can build up in your mind, especially if you aren't sleeping well."

He smiled at her. "Try not to have black thoughts."

"I'll try. But——"

To her intense relief Arthur had not come back when John had to go. She did not want the two men to meet. She walked with John to his car and when he was sitting in the driver's seat and had lowered the window she said quickly and earnestly: "It has done me good to talk to you. I never see anybody down here. Having you to talk to has been like seeing somebody from another world."

He smiled gently at her and said:

"You must come out into the other world, Jean."

She shook her head. "I can't. Not until the house releases me."

## CHAPTER XVIII

TWO DAYS after the visit of John Thorpe to Platts, Arthur Engleton went into the old-fashioned, yet surprisingly efficient, chemist's shop in the middle of one side of Witherley High Street.

The shop was called Blackley's and Arthur had been into it two or three times before and knew the quietly spoken, rotund little Mr. Blackley by sight.

When he went in there was no other customer in the

shop and Mr. Blackley emerged from the living-room at the back to see what was wanted.

Jean's cold had developed into a feverish attack of 'flu and for forty-eight hours she had been feeling very sorry for herself indeed and had of necessity been in bed.

Arthur, who never took kindly to domesticity, had been forced to fend for himself in the way of cooking and had done a bare minimum and that inexpertly. It was lucky for Jean that she was feeling too bad to worry about food and had not wanted more than an occasional cup of tea and some bread and butter.

One of her main troubles was lack of sleep. The bout of sleeplessness which had been threatening her for some time past had now developed in earnest and for the past two nights she had scarcely slept at all.

It was this that brought Arthur into Blackley's shop.

Jean had written down the name of the pills which had years ago been prescribed for her by a young Swedish doctor then living in London and which she found so extraordinarily effective.

She didn't know whether these would be obtainable in Witherley and hardly dared to hope so.

"Most likely you won't be able to get them here," she had warned Arthur, "and if you can't you'll just have to tell the chemist about me and get something else. But get something."

Arthur handed over the piece of paper and said:

"I don't know if you stock these things——"

Mr. Blackley adjusted his glasses, read what Jean had scribbled down, and smiled.

Nothing pleased him more than to be asked for something out of the ordinary and to be able to supply it.

"I don't often get asked for them," he said, "they are rather out of the ordinary, but very effective, but as it happens I have got some in stock. Are they for yourself?"



"No. My wife. She's got a touch of 'flu and has been sleeping badly. She swears by these things, says there's nothing like them."

Mr. Blackley smiled again. "A lot of modern things turn out to be not so effective as the old," he said. "I'll see if I can find where they are."

The storage shelves of the shop were extensive and largely shrouded in an impressive gloom. It took the rotund little chemist some time to find what he was looking for, but he had an extraordinarily reliable memory where any question of what he had in stock was concerned and presently he emerged, rather dusty but triumphantly holding the dark-coloured box he had been looking for.

"I knew they were somewhere," he said. "Now, how many do you want?"

Arthur shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know—about a dozen, I suppose?"

"I should think that would be about right," the chemist agreed, beginning to count out the pills. "Your wife won't take more than one at a time in any case, will she?"

"I expect not. She's had them before, of course."

"Ah, then, she'll be used to them."

"Why, are they dangerous, or something?"

Mr. Blackley gave a little laugh. "Well," he said, "it's a matter of definition, or perhaps rather of degree, isn't it? Thousands of people take aspirins every day who wouldn't dream of calling them dangerous, yet, if you swallow enough aspirin all at once you can kill yourself. There, sir, six and six."

"Six and six!" Arthur demanded in sudden resentment against Jean at having let him in for such an expense.

"Unusual medicines are always on the expensive side. But you'll find these very efficacious."

Mumbling something about "they'd damned well want

to be at that price " Arthur picked up the packet of pills and turned away from the counter.

During his transaction with Mr. Blackley two other customers had come into the small shop and were waiting to be served.

Arthur had been aware that they had come in but now, turning, he saw them for the first time and to his surprise one of them was Valerie Stockley.

He was just about to speak to her when he caught a warning signal from her extraordinarily expressive eyes accompanied by the slightest shake of her head.

*"Not in here. Outside. Later."*

She didn't actually say the words but Arthur understood well enough that they were what she meant.

For the moment he felt annoyed. Ever since he had struck up his acquaintance with her she had been unpredictable in this matter of secrecy.

Sometimes she didn't seem to care in the slightest where they were seen together or by whom, in fact she seemed to glory in the fact that they should be seen together. But occasionally, and without any reason that he could see, all this would be changed on a sudden and she was insistent that they must avoid any meeting in public and be seen by nobody.

Arthur always fell in with her moods, but the secrecy business invariably annoyed him, as it did now in the chemist's shop.

However the curt message of her eyes and that shake of her doll-like head was quite unmistakable and her hold over him was far too firm for him to disregard and disobey them.

Without saying anything to her or giving any sign of recognition he went out of the shop into the High Street.

It hardly made sense to hang about waiting for her in the middle of the High Street so after only a moment's indecision he started to walk towards New Barn Lane.

Mill Cottage was locked up but by now he knew where

the key was kept and, having got it from the usual shelf in the shed at the back, he let himself in and waited.

Valerie's visit to the chemist had taken her very little time and she walked into the cottage before the waiting man had smoked more than a quarter of a cigarette.

"What's all the mysterious business in the shop about?" he demanded.

"Darling, you're cross."

She was in one of her most provocative moods and if Arthur had been cross, which in fact he was to start with, she had the weapons, and shamelessly used them, to mollify him. But for once it was he who made difficulties. He disengaged himself from her arms and said:

"I can't stop for more than a minute or two. Jean's in bed with 'flu."

"I know. I heard you talking to little Blackley. But you can stop a little, darling?"

"Only a minute or two."

Valerie laughed and looked at the clock.

"All right. A minute or two then. What were you buying at Blackley's?"

"Some sleeping pills for Jean."

"Let's see."

When Arthur handed her the box in which the "pills" had been put up she took off the lid and examined them.

"You can't swallow these," she exclaimed. "They're too big."

"You don't swallow them," Arthur explained. "You dissolve them in water and drink it."

"Oh, I see. What was little Blackley saying about their being dangerous?"

"Only if you take too many."

"How many is too many?"

"Three, four, I don't know."

"Interesting." She put the lid back on the box and handed it to him. "I've been at Maurice Lumley's place all morning typing estimates."

Arthur wasn't particularly interested in this piece of information and said so. Valerie smiled; she had her land-mine prepared and touched it off.

"I don't think he's interested in Platts any more."

"Not interested! You've been telling me he's willing to give up to eight thousand for the place!"

"So he was. When he thought there was a chance of getting it. But you can't expect him to hold up his schemes indefinitely. He wants to put up a housing estate and he wants to put it up where Platts stands now; but if he can't buy the place he'll go somewhere else and forget about Platts. It stands to sense, doesn't it?"

Arthur lit a cigarette and snapped the match in his fingers.

"What makes you say all this?" he asked.

"When I'm at Lumley's I keep my eyes and ears open and I pick up things."

"Has he got some other scheme in mind, then, already?"

"No, I don't think so. Not definitely. But he feels he's up against a brick wall as far as Platts is concerned, so——"

"Yes, yes. You've told me that."

She laughed quietly and said: "Don't get cross with me, Arthur."

"It's fantastic to think that we could get eight thousand pounds for that place. And it didn't cost us a penny. Fantastic."

"You won't be able to get anything for it soon. If Maurice Lumley doesn't buy it, nobody else will."

"Has he got his eye on some other property?"

"I've told you no, not yet; but he's looking around for one."

He shrugged his shoulders in angry despair. "What can I do?"

"That's up to you, Arthur, but whatever you do it's got to be done soon, or it will be no good."

She would not let him go back at once to Platts. It was easy enough for her to keep him in Mill Cottage if she wanted to, and in any case his efforts to go were only half-hearted.

More than an hour later she said: "Mix a drink for both of us Arthur and then you must go."

"I don't want to go."

"Maybe not. But you must. She'll be wondering what has become of you. Besides she'll be wanting those sleeping pills."

"Not till to-night."

When he had mixed a drink and handed it to her she said:

"I don't like any of these sleeping medicines. I don't trust them——"

"How do you mean?"

"Oh, accidents can happen——"

"Accidents?"

"A friend of mine took too many once and never woke up again."

Without looking at her he asked: "How did this accident occur?"

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose instead of dissolving one in the water, or whatever it was she had to do, she dissolved four or five by mistake."

"Wasn't there an inquest or something?"

"Oh, yes. But it's awfully hard to say afterwards whether it's really a mistake or whether a person has just got tired of things. All her husband could say was that she had been very depressed lately and that the house they were living in, it was supposed to be haunted or some nonsense, had been getting on her nerves."

"So it was suicide, eh?"

"Not even that. Accidental death by an overdose of a sleeping draught. Of course, just to be on the safe side, some C.I.D. men came asking questions. You have to be prepared for that, don't you, in cases like this? They

tried the glass the woman had drunk out of for fingerprints to see if anyone else had handed it to her, but they couldn't find anything so there wasn't anything else they could do.

"After all, if somebody, anybody, does take an overdose of some drug or other it's just too bad isn't it?"

Arthur was just in time to catch the bus back along Marsh Road. He sat by himself close to the door, looking with unseeing eyes at the already darkening landscape as it slid past, and holding in his hand the box of sleeping pills.

## CHAPTER XIX

IN SPITE of Arthur's assurance that he would come back "straight away" Jean had not, of course, expected him to do so. But she had hoped that he would not stay in Witherley later than the four o'clock bus.

If he didn't catch that, and obviously he hadn't, then he would not be back at Platts until well after six.

Jean was lying in bed feeling too wretched to read and as depressed as only a severe bout of 'flu can make a person.

If Arthur preferred staying in Witherley (she presumed it was at Mill Cottage) to coming home then the inescapable deduction was, her depressed mind told her, that the home she had tried to make for him was a failure. That her marriage had been a failure couldn't be denied as a new thought but it still remained a bitter one. And in her present frame of mind it was a thought with all sorts of unpleasant variants and embroideries: if she had failed a weak man like Arthur whom would she not fail was one of them, and that the doll-like doxy of Mill Cottage should be preferred to her was another.

Lying alone in the house listening not so much to



its noises as to its silences, in tune with its atmosphere, she began to wonder about the influence that was still to be felt in it.

A man or a woman? she wondered. And if it were a woman had *she* made a failure of her life; had *she* missed that elusive thing happiness; was it because she had let happiness slip from her or found it there that the wisp of her still clung so desperately to Platts?

"People make their own lives," John Thorpe had said to her; she wondered what he was making of life and whether he had found anybody to share it with him.

When she heard the noise of Arthur coming at the front door her feelings were mixed. She was lonely and no human being likes loneliness and any break in it can be welcome; on the other hand it was galling to know that her husband would come into her room with the atmosphere of the other woman in Mill Cottage still strong about him, perhaps with the image of her still burningly in his mind.

But when he came in and asked how she was feeling and talk between them went along the usual platitudes, comforting in their very ordinariness, Arthur seemed rather subdued and more attentive than usual.

Two or three times he asked if there was anything she wanted; and wherever else he had been in Witherley, at least he had not forgotten to go to the chemist and get her sleeping pills.

"Put them by the bed here," she said and he answered, "They'll clutter things up there. I'll keep them in the bathroom. Don't worry, I'll fix it for you when you want it."

At eight o'clock he brought up a tray with a pot of tea and some bread and butter. Jean had eaten very little during the day and did not want more than this simple enough fare now.

She was feeling too bad to be really worried about Arthur's evening meal, but he was proving so attentive

to her that she did feel a slight twinge of conscience about it.

"Will you be all right?" she asked.

"Yes. Perfectly. I'll boil myself an egg and there's plenty of cheese anyway."

Boiling an egg represented just about the limit of his possibilities in the kitchen.

After a certain amount of inward struggle Jean said: "If you want to go out to the Clarendon after supper I shan't mind being left alone."

"No. I don't want to go out this evening."

After he had eaten he came upstairs again and asked: "What time do you want to be put down for the night?"

"Not yet. But not too late, either. I'll thump on the floor when I'm ready."

"Then I'll come up and fix your sleeping draught for you."

"I could do it myself if you like to put the pills by my bed here."

"It's best for me to bring it when you're tucked up and lying down, ready to nod off at once."

"I only hope I *do* sleep."

"I expect you will."

When he went downstairs she tried to read for a bit but gave it up and switched off the light. Lying in the dark, looking out at the faintly starlit sky she could hear, but was not disturbed by, the music of the radio below. The noise came only faintly because Platts was a solidly-built house and what was loud enough in the drawing-room was muted to a not unpleasant background noise upstairs.

Arthur Engleton sat listening to the dance music and staring at the machine producing it.

A well-charged glass stood on a small table by his side but he was being careful not to drink too much.

At one time he had an almost irresistible desire to go out to the telephone kiosk and ring up Valerie Stockley.

He wanted to hear her voice; to have her insistence at the back of him, her assurance that everything would be all right.

But he managed not to go. Somebody might see him in the kiosk. It might come out, later, that he had telephoned. Just possibly, if any inquiries were being made, the call could be traced. Better not. Not that any inquiries would be made. Not in any serious sense. Nothing beyond the normal routine. And he could cope with all that.

He kept glancing at the clock; and then in some odd perversity of the human mind he decided that whatever the time might be he would not go upstairs until Jean knocked on the floor to call him.

If she didn't knock he wouldn't go. If she knocked, why then she had called him and he would go.

When ten o'clock came and there had been no sound from upstairs he thought that she wasn't going to call him; that she had fallen asleep and he would not be summoned.

He didn't know whether he felt frustrated or relieved, and before he could decide on his frame of mind—*thump-thump-thump*.

The noise, although half expected, startled him. An odd scrap of information floated into his mind from somewhere that in some theatre or other the raising of the curtain was always preceded traditionally by this triple knock.

He glanced at the clock. It showed nine minutes past ten. He got up and went out of the room, and as he went he said to himself in a sort of defence and excuse.

*"I wouldn't have gone if she hadn't knocked for me."*

In the bedroom he moved various books and papers off the bed and at Jean's request opened one of the windows.

"Is it warm or cold out, or what?" she asked.

"It isn't cold yet, but I daresay there'll be a frost in the early morning; it might turn to rain."

"I hope I'm not awake to hear it."

"You'll probably sleep well to-night."

"Would you bring me my sleeping draught now? You know how to do it, don't you? Crush up a tablet and let it dissolve in about half a glass of water."

"I'll go and do it."

He went out quickly into the bathroom and when he was there sat for a few seconds on the edge of the bath. His throat had gone very dry and he was trembling.

"*Valerie*," he thought . . .

Presently he took the tumbler from its stand above the hand-basin and half filled it from the cold tap, running more water into it, up to the three-quarter mark, after a moment's hesitation.

The box of sleeping pills—marked "Not for children. Adult dose never to exceed One Pill per night"—was on the shelf. He took it down, opened it, and counted the large, slightly yellow pills inside.

There were thirteen.

He counted them again to make sure. Thirteen. The chemist must have meant to give him a dozen, he supposed, and had made a mistake. Not that it mattered. He wasn't superstitious. And in any case he wasn't the one the pills were going to be unlucky for.

He picked one up and dropped it into the water. A very slight effervescence occurred and then with remarkable rapidity the pill dissolved until there was not a trace of it to be seen.

He waited for a moment and then dropped in a second pill, then a third and a fourth. After thinking for a few seconds he added two more and then, almost as an after-thought a final one. Seven all told. He could not believe that seven wouldn't be enough.

He was worried about the taste. He didn't know if they made the water taste and if she would be suspicious and question him.

If they were tasteless the more he put in the better.

He put two more in and then waited, trembling violently.

He heard his wife call out and, although he couldn't distinguish the words, guessed that she must be asking why he was so long.

This rattled him. He had no idea how long he had been in the bathroom; and suddenly had an idea that he might have been ten minutes there and would not be able to explain it.

He picked up the glass and went into the corridor, along it and into the bedroom.

Jean stared at him as he came in.

"What on earth have you been so long for?"

"Sorry. I couldn't find the glass."

He didn't know how white and strained he looked, but guessed something was amiss from the way Jean was looking at him.

"Here you are," he said, holding out the glass. "I put in one of them—that's right, isn't it?"

She nodded and stretched out her hand to take the glass from him. As her fingers touched it a bell rang in the house.

It was so unexpected that for a moment it startled her and she could see that, for some unaccountable reason, Arthur was positively alarmed.

"Who on earth can that be at the door at this time of night?" she said, breaking the dramatic silence that had followed the last sound of the bell.

"God knows," he said roughly, finding relief in the ordinary act of speech. "I'd better go and see, I suppose."

Jean heard him going along the passage and moved the glass to her lips to drink up her sleeping draught.

As her lips actually touched the glass she was aware of an overpoweringly strong sensation. It wasn't sound, for no voice spoke; it didn't come from sight, for nothing was visible; it had no connection with touch for nothing made contact with her, yet it was as though all these

senses combined, as though simultaneously she heard, saw and felt a message forbidding her to drink.

It was knowledge transmitted to her in the most forceful manner imaginable from another world.

*"Don't drink it."*

She moved the glass away from her lips and was aware of little beads of perspiration on her forehead forced there by the intensity of the communication that had been made to her.

She heard—but in a way without hearing, it seemed remote and unmeaning—the noise Arthur made opening the front door.

*Arthur who had given her the drink which she must not drink. Her husband who had lurched against her opposite the lift shaft.*

She heard the front door shut and Arthur's foot on the bottom step of the stairs, coming up.

On the table next to her bed, behind the alarm clock and a small pile of books was a pot plant. Acting quickly she reached out and poured the contents of the glass into the earth in which the plant stood.

By the time her husband came into the room she was lying back on the pillow holding out the now empty glass for him to take it from her.

She watched his eyes.

They went immediately to the glass and for a second stayed there.

Then they came slowly to her face.

"Who was it?" she asked.

"There wasn't anybody there. Must have been some boy playing the fool, I suppose."

"At this time of night?"

"What else can it have been?"

Jean laughed.

"I expect I'll sleep well to-night," she lied. "I feel drowsy already. Take the glass."

Her husband hesitated for a second then took the glass from her outstretched hand.



He looked down on her and after a second's silence said:

"Good night, Jean."

Then he turned out the light and left her and the room in darkness behind him.

On the way to his own room Arthur put the glass back in the bathroom. It would be necessary to put both it and the depleted box of pills on the table by the bedside in the morning before anybody else was called to the house.

He did not think that any other detail had to be seen to and presently he himself was in bed and, in spite of his thumping heart and a sick sensation that had seized on his stomach, asleep.

He woke suddenly and completely, being fully conscious all at once.

It was very dark and the clock by his bedside told him it was two exactly. Exactly two o'clock.

"*How long does it take to work?*" he thought and sat up in bed in the dark sweating with the intensity of his thought. The frightening intensity.

"*How long does it take to work?*"

He stayed there, sitting up in bed, staring into the darkness and not noticing the cold that had overtaken the early morning air for a full ten minutes.

Then he knew that he could keep away no longer. There was an invisible urge upon him to go along the passage and *see*.

He got out of bed but would not put on the light.

Some instinct prevented him from using the light.

He shrank from light.

Without troubling to put on his dressing-gown he groped his way down the pitch-dark corridor.

Opposite the bedroom door he hesitated. His heart was racing and the feeling of nausea had increased.

After waiting for five, for maybe more, seconds, he

reached out his hand, turned the handle with infinite care and quiet and went in.

Here there was a little light. Or at least a lessening of total darkness. The curtains were not drawn to cover the windows and enough light from a lately risen moon came in for him to see the bed and the form lying on it.

He stood there unable to make up his mind to bend over her and find out. Unaware that from under lowered lids she was watching him, frightened and fascinated.

Just as he was about to move she spoke. In a whisper, yet very clearly.

*"What do you want, Arthur? Why are you here?"*

## CHAPTER XX

JOHN THORPE was walking along Danvers Street to the Venice Private Hotel where he still lived. It was six o'clock in the evening and he had had a busy day. Briefs were beginning to come on to his desk with gratifying regularity; nothing big so far, but at least there were now sufficient small ones to provide a comfortable living and to give him good grounds for hoping that better things were in store.

Despite initial difficulties with Mrs. Hardcastle he had not moved from the Venice. Mrs. Hardcastle knew a good client when she saw one and she had had the sense to forget about her brush with John Thorpe over Mrs. Engleton's affair and to go out of her way to please him since.

The result was that he was reasonably comfortable and, all things considered, it was less trouble to stay where he was than to try to find somewhere else.

John Thorpe bought an evening paper, as was his custom, from the cheerful newsvendor on the corner of

Danvers Street but he immediately slipped it into his coat pocket without even glancing at the headlines.

He was thinking, as during the last forty-eight hours he had often found himself thinking, of Jean Engleton.

Time and time again he had gone over their conversation in the drawing-room of Platts and the more often he recalled it the less he liked it.

She was unhappy and afraid. After what she had told him of the way her married life had gone it was not difficult to understand why she should be unhappy but her fear was another matter. That he did not fully understand, and when he thought that he might possibly understand the reason behind it he felt more perturbed than ever.

"I ought to have made her say exactly what she *did* mean," he told himself, angry at his own lack of insistence in the matter.

"John."

He had been thinking about Jean so vividly that her sudden appearance in front of him and the sound of her voice saying his name really startled him for a moment.

"John."

He managed to smile and said: "You quite startled me for the moment."

"I'm sorry."

"I was thinking about you and then, suddenly, you were there! Are you all right! Is anything the matter?"

"I wanted to come and talk to you. Can I?"

"Yes, of course."

"I didn't know if you were still at the Venice, but I had to take a chance. I didn't want to call there and run into Mrs. Hardcastle again so I've just been waiting here till you came along."

"Good heavens, how long have you been here?"

"Oh, not too long. Only just over half an hour. I could guess pretty well what time you would be getting back if you still lived here."

"Yes, I'm still there. It's comfortable enough and Mrs. H. and I hardly ever run across one another so I've no complaints about her personally. Hadn't we better go and have a cup of tea somewhere?"

"I'm dying for something to eat and drink. I've made rather a mess of my day, really."

He realised for the first time that she was carrying a small case and he asked no questions about it but said simply: "Let's go to Ruffino's, where we went that time before."

"Yes, I'd like that."

When they had settled down and John had ordered tea from the same dark-eyed Italian girl who had waited on them the first time he turned and faced Jean and said in a low voice:

"Jean, what's the matter? What's happened?"

She caught her breath quickly and said: "I don't know. Perhaps nothing. Perhaps I'm just being a fool. Imagining things. I've kept telling myself all day that I'm being a fool; that I'm imagining things. But——"

"But what?"

"*But I know I'm not.*"

John smiled at her and for a moment closed his strong hand firmly over hers.

"At any rate we are not imagining this," he said. "Here we are together. You're safe and sound. Nothing can hurt you for the moment and you can take your time telling me whatever it is you want to tell me."

The tea was brought and Jean occupied herself pouring it out, asking the conventional questions about sugar and milk and so on.

Presently John prompted her quietly with:

"Why do you say you made a mess of your day?"

"I came away in a hurry this morning and I don't seem to have got myself organised since."

"Did you quarrel with your husband before you came away, have a row?"

"Not exactly. No."

"What made you come away then? Was there any particular reason?"

"Yes, there was," Jean said, speaking slowly and very low. "I believe that Arthur tried to kill me last night."

He realised that this was what she had been on the verge of telling him in the drawing-room at Platts and for a moment he hardly knew how to deal with the situation. She dealt with it for him.

"I realise this is difficult for you. You're probably thinking that this is all nonsense and I'm hysterical——"

"I don't think you're hysterical at all."

"You think I'm imagining things then; making them up."

"Just tell me all there is to tell me and let me make up my mind for myself about what I think and don't think."

She smiled a little wanly and said: "All right. That's fair enough. Here goes——"

She told him all about the evening when she had come back from London ("it was the day you lunched with Ursula Hinds and me") and Arthur had stumbled on to her in the blacked-out corridor and thrown her against the lift gates.

John listened in silence, nodding occasionally, and at the end he said quietly:

"And what happened yesterday?"

Jean began to tell him and as she spoke he asked a question or two.

"Was it a usual sort of thing for him to do to get your sleeping draught ready for you?"

"No. Very unusual. Arthur likes things done for him. It just doesn't enter his head to do them for other people. He isn't that sort of man."

"Didn't you think it unusual at the time?"

"Yes, I did. But I was feeling pretty mouldy and as long as I got the sleeping draught I didn't mind."

"And when he brought it in to you, was there anything out of the way or noticeable?"

"Only the ring at the front-door bell."

"Somebody came to the front door?"

"Just as Arthur was handing me the glass, the front-door bell rang and I could see that it frightened him."

"Frightened him?"

"He looked white and odd when he came in from the bathroom and when the bell went he was positively scared."

"What time was it?"

"Ten-past ten, something like that."

"Who was it at the door?"

"Nobody."

"How do you mean 'nobody'?"

"Arthur went down to see who it was. He opened the door and there was nobody there. Nobody."

"Was somebody playing a joke or something?"

"That's what Arthur tried to make himself believe; but it wasn't that."

John Thorpe looked at her for some seconds in silence then he asked:

"What then? What happened when he came back into the room?"

"Something happened before he came back into the room——"

"What was that?"

"Maybe it isn't any good telling you. You ask me what happened, I tell you something 'happened'; we use the same word but we may not mean the same thing. Perhaps a thing only 'happens' for you if you can see it move, or hear it make a noise, or feel it touch you."

"How did it, whatever it was, happen for you?"

She touched her breast.

"Inside me. Inside my head and inside my body. It was knowledge. I *knew* that I mustn't drink what was in the glass Arthur had prepared for me. Knew it even



more certainly than if writing a foot high had appeared on the white ceiling saying '*don't drink it.*' Can you understand that, can you believe it? "

He was staring at her, fascinated. He knew beyond peradventure of a doubt that what she was saying was the truth. Whether he understood it or not, he had to believe it.

He nodded. "I believe you—and then? "

"I didn't drink it. I poured it away into a plant that was on the bedside table."

"Your—*he* thought you had drunk it? "

"As soon as he came back into the room his eyes went to the glass. If you are going to commit crimes you should wear dark glasses, do you realise that, John? A man's eyes can give him away more than anything else."

"Was that all? "

"No. In the middle of the night, which means early in the morning, I suppose it was about two o'clock, I was awake. I was drowsy but awake. The moon had got up and there was a little light from it and suddenly the door opened and Arthur came very quietly into the room and stared at me. He had come back to see, John. I know he had."

Thorpe was silent for a long time . . . his mind wanted to reject what was being offered to it but couldn't . . . you read about this sort of thing, he thought; it *does* happen; and here it is now happening to the woman sitting opposite you in a Bloomsbury teashop, the woman who has come to mean more to you than anybody else you have ever met. . . .

"What happened this morning? " he asked at length.

"My 'flu was much better. I would have got up in any case but, in fact, I did feel better. I put a few things in a case and whilst Arthur was in his study I put a note in the hall saying I would not be at home for the night and here I am."

He nodded his approval.

"I think you're right. You mustn't go back as things are."

"I can't. The house has saved me once, perhaps twice; but it won't go on saving me."

"The first thing to do is to find you a room in a hotel somewhere and then we can have another council of war to-morrow. Don't worry and don't let it get you down."

"John, you are being a good friend to me; don't think I shall ever forget it."

He smiled at her suddenly and once again laid a firm, warm hand on hers.

"I find it easy to be good to you, Jean, very easy."

When Arthur came out of his study towards one o'clock he did not at first notice the note in the hall and it was only after a fruitless search for Jean herself in the kitchen that he eventually found it.

During the morning he had managed if not to forget the happenings of the previous evening and night at least to persuade himself that Jean had not noticed anything unusual, but the discovery of her note went a long way to shatter this illusion.

It was completely unlike her to go up to London suddenly, and he could not understand her staying away for the night at all.

Like all essentially self-centred people he thought immediately of how his own comfort was going to be affected.

There didn't seem to be any provision made for a midday meal so he was forced to forage in a not very well-stocked larder and to make shift for himself.

He felt a comforting glow of indignation against his wife for putting him to this annoyance; but this was only in the front of his mind, at the back of his thoughts lay the disturbing queries, *What had made Jean decide to go up to London so suddenly? Did she suspect anything?*

He realised that it had been a mistake to go to her room

in the early morning. Probably a big mistake. But not, after all, a fatal one.

Because a man comes into your room in the middle of the night to see if you are all right you can't prove that he has been trying to do anything to you.

But what had happened about the sleeping draught?

He thought perhaps that he had dissolved too many pills in the water; it was possible, he supposed, to make the draught too strong, that after a certain strength it began to defeat its own object.

After a highly unsatisfactory lunch he caught the early afternoon bus into Witherley. He knew that Valerie Stockley would be waiting for him at Mill Cottage and, although he didn't really want to go and see her, he knew that he couldn't keep away. And what was even more galling to him, he knew that she knew that he couldn't keep away so that when she greeted him with a self-satisfied laugh and "I knew you'd come" he flared out immediately.

It was the worst quarrel they had had and it died away as suddenly and irrationally as it had sprung up.

Valerie lit a cigarette, drew at it twice to make sure that it was well alight and then put it between Arthur's lips.

"We mustn't fall out," she said. "We can't afford to."

"Sorry."

"What happened?"

"Everything was all right. Up to a point. She was in bed and I said I'd mix the sleeping draught for her. I did it in the bathroom. The chemist had put thirteen pills in the box instead of twelve and I dissolved nine of them in the water——"

"Nine?"

"It especially says not to take more than one so nine must have been enough surely?"

"Did she drink it?"

"Just as I was handing her the glass the front-door bell rang so I had to go down and see who it was——"

"Who was it?"

"There wasn't anybody there."

They looked at one another for a moment in silence, then she asked:

"What was it, then?"

"It might have been somebody playing a practical joke; it might have been some damned nonsense of the house—not that I believe any of that really."

"What happened when you got back into the bedroom?"

"She handed me the empty glass."

"Had she drunk it?"

"Yes. She must have done, except——"

"What?"

"I've just thought. There's a plant in a pot on the table by her bed; she *could* have poured it away into that."

"Why should she? You hadn't done anything to make her suspect, had you?"

"N-no. I don't see how she could have suspected anything then. I think I may have used too many pills."

"Too many?"

"Sometimes with that sort of thing if you use too much it just makes a person sick and doesn't do anything else."

Valerie looked dubious. "Could be, I suppose." She said without conviction, "How do you mean, she couldn't have suspected anything '*then*'?"

"I think she does now."

"Why? Why should she? What has she said, anyway?"

"Nothing. She hasn't said anything. She's gone up to London."

"Why shouldn't she go to London? Why shouldn't anybody go to London?"

"Yes. But not Jean. Not like that."

"Like what?"

"She didn't even tell me she was going. Nothing was

said. She just left a note to say she was going and wouldn't be back to-night."

"Something else must have happened you haven't told me about. Was there anything?"

"In a way, yes."

Arthur hadn't wanted to say anything about his visit to his wife's bedroom in the middle of the night, sensing, in advance, that Valerie would think it foolish.

"In a way? In what way? What was it?"

"I went back to see how she was later. And she was awake."

"What time was this?"

"Early in the morning. It was two o'clock."

The woman was in her favourite pose, half-lying on the sofa, her hands clasped behind her head, her legs crossed, her knees drawn up.

She glanced at the man and paused before speaking again. There were moments when he infuriated her, when she thought he was an ineffectual fool; but she realised that there was no point in quarrelling. There would be plenty of time for that later. For the present they mustn't fall out.

"What made you go back to the bedroom then, Arthur?" she asked.

"You've said it. What made me? That's just it. Something *did* make me. I couldn't help it. I woke up and looked at my watch. It was two. Two exactly. And there was something inside me which wouldn't be satisfied till I had got up and gone to her bedroom and—and *seen*."

"Did you go?"

"Yes. I didn't put on the light. There was a moon by then anyway and some light came in by the landing window. I went into her room and stood there for a moment just looking and wondering. Then she spoke to me. She was awake."

"What did she say?"

"She said, '*What do you want, Arthur, why are you here?*' She knew."

"I doubt it. I don't suppose so for one moment."

"You didn't hear her."

"Things always sound worse at two o'clock in the morning. She simply asked you what you wanted."

"And now she's gone up to Town."

Valerie smiled. "And won't be back till to-morrow. So we've got Platts to ourselves for the night."

"The sooner I get rid of that damned house the better."

"You can't get rid of it till we've arranged things as we want them."

"We don't seem very successful so far."

"No good getting in a panic over it. In fact that's the one thing we mustn't do. What's the time?"

"A quarter to four, why?"

"There's a film at the Regent that I want to see. We'll have tea here and then you shall take me to the film and afterwards we'll go up to Platts. You don't want to spend the whole evening up there alone, do you?"

Arthur laughed. "Not if I can have you there," he admitted.

"Well, you can."

Arthur had not expected this amiable mood from her. True, they had started with a violent quarrel, but as far as he was concerned that was already forgotten and under the almost hypnotic influence that this woman exercised over him he was beginning to forget, too, the fears which the events of the night had started.

For a woman who normally lived a lazy and in some ways a sluttish life, Valerie could be surprisingly domesticated when she chose, and now she suddenly jumped off the sofa and bustled about to get tea for them both, humming as she moved about in the small room.

"I always associate that tune with you," Arthur said, watching her quick, sharp movements.

Valerie laughed. "Naturally, it's my tune——"



*"Anything you can do  
I can do better  
I can do anything better than you."*

After tea they walked into the High Street together to the Regent Cinema and because they arrived in the middle of the film Valerie wanted to see they had to sit round and see it again and did not finally come out until half-past seven.

They then went into the snack bar of the Reindeer, the largest of Witherley's assortment of pubs, which was bright and warm and full and noisy.

Valerie responded at once to the atmosphere of the place. "I like it like this," she said. "Have you got plenty of money, Arthur?"

Arthur said sourly that he never had plenty of money and that it was an inescapable part of being a freelance writer not to have plenty of money.

"You could have plenty if you wanted."

"For God's sake don't keep on at me."

She laughed and pinched his arm affectionately.

"Don't get in a state. I'm only teasing. And the evening's on me, anyway. I'm flush, for once."

She ordered two large whiskies and a plate of sandwiches and they sat down at a table in a corner.

Presently Maurice Lumley came in with two other men and stood at the bar drinking.

He caught sight of them sitting in the corner and nodded.

"I'd just as soon he hadn't seen us together," Arthur said.

"Maurice Lumley? What on earth does it matter? What can he do?"

"No. Still——"

"Maurice Lumley can't do anything—except buy Platts from you for eight thousand pounds."

"Some day I'll sell it to him."

Lumley and his friends eventually went out, the composition of the crowd standing round the bar changed, but Valerie and Arthur Engleton stayed on in their corner talking.

She ordered a second round of drinks to supplement the first and when these were finished he insisted on buying a round.

"You needn't, Arthur. I told you, the evening's on me."

"Don't be silly. I'm not so hard up as all that. People still want my stuff, you know; some of them; in spite of the fact that I've damned near written myself out."

"You haven't written yourself out, Arthur."

"No?" He asked the question sardonically at first, but then suddenly changed his tone. "No, maybe I haven't really. Maybe I can still do something good. Sometimes I feel I can."

"When you're with me you can do anything."

He nodded. He felt like that, too. He knew that it was partly the whisky he had drunk. But only partly. This woman activated him. *For evil, possibly*, he thought, *but she activates me. . . .*

"If we aren't careful we shall still be here at closing time," he said.

"And get thrown out."

"What time does that last bus go—it's gone by now, surely?"

"We aren't worrying about buses, Arthur. You order another round and I'll go and do something about transport."

When she came back from telephoning she said, smiling slowly at him: "It's all right. Hurd's picking us up here in ten minutes' time."

"I wonder you don't lay on a photographer to take a picture of us as well," Arthur grumbled, but when the taxi from Hurd's garage called for them he made no further demur and, in fact, as it happened no one was

about on the pavement outside the Reindeer to see them get into the car.

"Going home, sir?" George Hurd asked in a flat, noncommittal voice. He knew who Arthur was by this time and if he thought that "the man from Platts" was being made a fool of in Mill Lane he was also well aware that the first sensible duty of a taxi-driver, who sees more than most of what goes on in a small town, is to keep his mouth shut.

"Yes. Platts please," Arthur said, not at all displeased at being recognised despite the fact that on the whole he thought the less he and Valerie were seen together the better . . .

"... *until afterwards*" he told himself, hardly daring to amplify the dark sentence in his mind.

The evening had turned much colder in the last hour or so and as George Hurd's taxi sped along the lonely Marsh Road its headlights sparkled and twinkled in the frost.

In the back of the car Valerie moved against Arthur for warmth and slipped her arm through his.

They drove in and pulled up in the drive.

The moon was not yet up and the house was no more than a blacker patch in the general darkness.

"Shall I wait, sir?" George Hurd asked impassively.

"Of course not," Valerie laughed, beginning to walk towards the front door.

"This damned gloomy house," she said when Arthur came up behind her. "We'll sell it just as soon as we can, Arthur, won't we?"

As he stepped inside Arthur felt for the hall light-switch and turned it on. But this didn't satisfy the woman with him. She was suddenly avid of light and insisted on the lights being put on in every room in the house.

"Put every light in the house on," she said. "Every single one, Arthur. Let's show the house whether we are depressed by it or not."

She led the way from the hall into the drawing-room and then in turn into every room on the ground floor flicking down every light-switch that she could see until the house was blazing with light.

It made her laugh and Arthur's slightly astonished face made her laugh still more.

"That's better, I hate the dark. We'll show Platts it can't play tricks with us. I'm going to put every single light on upstairs as well."

He followed her upstairs and waited in the bedroom until she came back from her expedition through the rooms.

"There isn't a light in the place that isn't on," she announced. "No wonder you want to sell this house, Arthur, it's like a morgue."

She went to the door, opened it, and shouted out into the corridor: "This house is a morgue, a morgue."

"That's what I think of Platts, Arthur," she said, turning back into the room and leaning against the door her hands held high above her head.

He nodded, looking at her hungrily, "Platts can't hurt us," he agreed.

"Nothing can hurt us. You can do things, anything and get away with it. If you're careful enough. And if you're the right sort."

"Are we the right sort?"

"Of course," she had moved away from the door now and was beginning to undress. "You've got to kick life around Arthur, or it's soon kicking you around."

"You don't have to tell me about that."

"Act on it, then."

"For God's sake," he suddenly exploded, "I don't want a course of Samuel Smiles at this particular moment."

The woman laughed. She enjoyed his rare outbursts of temper with her. Free now of her clothes she stretched slowly and voluptuously.

"No," she agreed, "Samuel Smiles isn't what you want now . . ."

Later as they lay together, Arthur smoking a cigarette, the room was suddenly plunged into darkness. There had been three lights on in it and they all went out together.

They were both startled for the moment and then Valerie said.

"A fuse must have gone."

"Unless the plug has been pulled out."

"You're scared of the house, Arthur."

He heaved himself off the bed and went to the door.

"The light's gone in the corridor, too. All over the house probably. It was your silly trick of putting the whole lot on together most likely."

"What does it matter? Come back and lie down."

Presently, after some minutes of silence, it was the woman who spoke again.

"Arthur, what happens when a light fuses?"

"What happens? How should I know. I'm a writer, not an electrician."

"No. But when a fuse burns out, or whatever the term is, isn't there a danger of fire?"

"Sometimes, I suppose so. Not that I know much about it."

"I should have thought fire could be very dangerous in an oldish house like this."

"Platts would burn like a bonfire."

"Well, then, you fool, *make it burn like a bonfire.*"

The sudden ferocity of her voice opened his eyes to the fact that she had not just been talking at random. As usual she was scheming.

"You're alone here every night, just the two of you," she went on, quietly, but something of the urgency of what she was saying crept into her words and hurried them a little, "a fire starts in the middle of the night. You wake up and find it raging. But it has already got too much hold for you to get to the room where your wife sleeps alone to warn her."

"And the house isn't on the telephone."

"Exactly. So you can't get the fire brigade, or any sort of help till it's too late."

After a pause the man asked:

"How do fires start, anyway?"

"By someone leaving a lighted candle burning in the hall, or in the corridor."

"A candle!"

"Aren't you always having trouble with plugs being pulled out and couldn't you say you always put candles and matches handy?"

"As a matter of fact we have talked about doing just that very thing."

"There you are, then. And if somebody, it must have your poor wife, of course, lit a candle to see her way upstairs since the light had gone again and accidentally left it burning out on the landing——"

"Near a curtain."

"And when you woke up first you thought you smelt smoke but you weren't sure and didn't do anything about it (you'll never forgive yourself). A little later you woke again and this time, Arthur, the room was full of smoke. And so was the landing. And when you fought your way along to your wife's room it was locked."

"Locked?"

"Why shouldn't it be? There's a key isn't there?"

"Jean never does lock her room."

"She always locks her room. You're telling the Coroner so. She locks it because of the queer things that go on in the house and she's scared of them."

"The key would be on the outside."

"If the house is really burnt out who will know afterwards where the key was?"

After a pause she asked:

"How do you heat the upstairs of the house, Arthur?"

"Heat it? There's a paraffin stove on the landing just outside the door here. Why?"

She laughed quietly. "How very convenient. Isn't it



just the sort of place anyone might use to put a candle on? Silly, of course, to do it; but then people do silly things, don't they? Especially women. And in the end when the damage is done it's too late to ask questions or make inquiries. Too late to do anything except say how sorry you are."

He lay beside her in the dark, smoking; watching the tip of his cigarette as it glowed red against the blackness of the room. A wind had sprung up and the windows rattled in it.

The woman by his side had said nothing for some time now and he was not sure whether she was asleep or not.

He said "Valerie" once quietly and she did not answer so when his cigarette came to an end he stubbed it out on the ash-tray on the bedside table and tried to go off to sleep himself.

He did not really expect to.

Being with this woman and listening to her plans always affected him like this, it stirred up something within him which was profoundly disturbing. He knew that all his life he had been mean; but she was evil. And when she exerted her evil on him he could not help yielding to it.

He was frightened of her; yet he was bound to her.

Presently, in spite of not expecting to, he became so drowsy that he lost consciousness and slept, dreaming disquieting nightmarish dreams in which he knew that he was horribly afraid of something yet could never quite discover what it was.

A long time after that, he did not know how long, for he had been away on a journey into the misty fringes of another world, he thought he heard somebody say, "*There's smoke in the room.*"

The remark got caught up in the framework of his dream, although it was entirely irrelevant and did not worry him.

When it was repeated he knew more about it. A woman was saying it. Valerie.

She said it again and he woke up.

"*Arthur, I can smell smoke in the room.*"

Still half in the world he had been voyaging into, half in the one he had been called back to, he was confused and resentful that she should be harking back to what she had been saying such a long time ago.

But she touched him, putting a hand on his arm and shaking him.

"*Arthur, there's smoke in the room.*"

He was awake now. Fully awake and sitting up in bed.

There was no mistaking the acrid smell of burning. It was strong and frightening.

Automatically he stretched out his hand and clicked on the switch of the bedside lamp.

Nothing happened.

"The lights have all gone," she said. "Get out and see what it is."

He stumbled in the dark a little and did not manage to open the door at the first attempt.

"... *the door's locked,*" he thought wildly; but it wasn't locked, of course, it was only the now pungent and increasing smell of burning which was confusing him making him catch his breath and gasp a little.

And suddenly he was aware of sound, too. A curious crackling noise like paper being flexed and unflexed a dozen times a second.

For a second it puzzled him.

Then he was terrified. It was the sound of fire. A primitive sound which had terrified man in huge dark forests and on wide, dry plains æons before it came to terrify this one mean and evil man in a blazing house in Marsh Road.

He licked his lips and the smoke got inside his mouth so that he coughed and choked with it.

"For God's sake," the woman in the bed screamed at him, "what are you doing? Open the door and see what's happening."

His fingers found the handle and the door wasn't locked. He knew a fraction of a second of almost amused relief.

Of course it wouldn't be locked.

He pushed it open and darkness was darkness no longer. The corridor was lambent with flame, flame running along the floor, licking up the walls, reaching for him through the very air.

Fire, the first enemy and the final avenger.

The opening of the door had caused a draught and the flames were fanned into fresh and even more frightening life.

The woman had jumped out of bed and was standing by his side wide-eyed and almost too terrified to speak.

"God, God," she moaned in a curiously little voice, "what are we going to do?"

For a second or so the flames along the corridor died down and the man thought that there was a chance. There had to be a chance. He seized the woman by the arm and shouted:

"Come on. With me. Make a dash for it."

Then, letting go of her and not really caring whether she followed or not, or what happened so long as he got clear himself, he started to run.

By the time they reached the head of the staircase the flames were fierce again and a great waft of dense smoke came billowing up the stairs at them.

The man spluttered and coughed, retched and could not breathe so that his lungs felt like bursting and he clawed out with his hands.

Although there was light from the flames it was not light they could see by.

It merely illuminated a dense rolling waft of smoke so that they were lost and bewildered in a brilliantly lit, all enveloping swirl of yellow fog, a bright and cruel cloud.

But somehow, fighting, stumbling, falling once and only

half recovering, the man managed to get down the stairs. He thought that the woman was near him. He couldn't be sure. Time, direction, distance, his sense of all three had completely vanished. Dense smoke was filling his gasping lungs; it blinded him and the always increasing crackle of burning wood terrified him.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs he thought he would just struggle across the immense distance to where he hoped the front door would be.

He was on his feet, staggering and swaying, but on his feet.

Some tiny unclouded patch in his brain told him that there was nothing now between him and the door, the door with blessed air and coolness outside it. With the thought a ray of hope flickered up inside him. And on that instant he collided with something which had no right to be there and crashed over the unexpected obstacle to the ground.

As he bent down he knew what it was. A chair. A chair which no human hand had put in the hall . . .

The fall took too much out of him; of necessity he gasped still more urgently for air and there was no air, only the cruel harsh smoke denying the life-giving oxygen to his desperate lungs.

He made frantic efforts to get up again but each was weaker than the one before it; and they none of them succeeded. . . .

## CHAPTER XXI

By a fitting coincidence it was young Richard Foster who was the first person to see the blazing house.

He had been visiting friends at Oakley which lay on the other side of the Marsh and, finding some unexpectedly attractive girls there, had stayed dancing to a gramophone a good deal later than he had meant to.

In fact it was well after one when he finally drove away amid a chorus of shouted good nights and laughter.

Coming back along the Marsh Road into Witherley he did not expect to meet any traffic at that hour in the morning. Nor did he expect to see much evidence of life; that part of the world still keeps to a simpler, less sophisticated time-table than most.

Just occasionally in some cottage or isolated farm-house the yellow square of a lighted window showed up but generally speaking the flat, misty countryside and the people who got their living from it were asleep.

Richard enjoyed driving in the dark and liked rather than disliked the night loneliness of the roads. It was when he came over the curious hump-back bridge (an eminence in those parts) which marks the beginning of the last five miles into Witherley that he first saw the light in the sky.

For a moment or two he speculated as to what it could be—a huge bonfire, banked up as only your East Anglian gardener knows how, that had flared up during the night? The upthrown glare from the cabin of an engine on the Witherley line? Or a fire?

A fire it must be, he soon realised; a house on fire somewhere between him and Witherley and burning pretty smartly.

He accelerated, glancing occasionally at the glare in the sky and becoming more and more sure as the seconds and half-minutes slipped by that the fire, whatever house it was at, must lie very close to the road he was following.

He couldn't be sure of the exact location until he actually arrived on the scene. Then there was no doubt about it.

"My God, it's Platts," he cried aloud and braking hard he turned into the drive. Not more than two-thirds of the way up it he stopped. The wind was blowing strongly from the direction of the house and even at that distance the heat was intense.

He got out of his car and stood for a moment surveying the scene in horror. He had never before seen fire in complete mastery anywhere and had not realised how dramatic and devastating it could be.

"*My God,*" he said under his breath and in a sort of terrified admiration, "*what a shambles!*"

He supposed that Jean and her husband must be round the other side of the house, keeping to windward of it, trying to save things and, skirting on a wide circle because of the heat, he ran round to find them.

Finding nobody he slowed up and began to shout and by the time he had made the full circle and come round to where he started he was beginning to be horribly afraid.

"*God Almighty, they're in it,*" he thought and he felt sick.

He ran round to the comparatively cool yard at the back again, running very quickly this time and when he got there he shouted as loud as he could. But quite unavailing. It had never occurred to him that a blazing house could make so much noise and as though in direct derision of his silly little efforts whilst he was actually shouting "*Jean, Jean, Mrs. Engleton*" part of the roof crashed in and a tongue of flame leapt skyward, roaring and crackling, so as completely to drown his efforts.



He stood there irresolute and horror stricken, not knowing what to do.

He thought there must be a ladder in the out-buildings somewhere and with the notion that it might be possible to get in at an upstairs window somehow he began feverishly to search for one. But after a fruitless two minutes he pulled himself up, realising that even if he found a ladder it was going to be of singularly little use. The whole house was ablaze, belching out flames and luridly-lit smoke through the now gaping roof.

He ran down the drive, jumped into his car and, reversing into the road, drove to the telephone kiosk which, he remembered, was not far away.

It was ascertained later that the Witherley Fire Brigade, an efficient organisation, reached Platts less than a quarter of an hour after receiving the alarm.

"Not that it would have made much difference," John Baker, its chief officer said, "if we hadn't got there for another hour. By the time we arrived the place was past any possibility of saving. I've never seen such a completely destructive fire. Of course, there was a good strong wind blowing, but even so it was astonishing how completely the flames had got hold."

By noon next day the fire was burnt out and what was once Platts was now no more than three blackened walls (one had collapsed completely) and a huge mass of mouldering ashes.

By this time two fire engines were there; a salvage unit; a police car; a photographer from the local paper and of course the inevitable twoscore of sightseers and rubbernecks.

Under a tarpaulin in a corner of the front garden, watched over by a young policeman, lay what, when he had first seen it, had made that same young policeman feel very unpleasantly sick.

Some human remains.

"As far as I can tell at the moment," the police surgeon had said, "one man and one woman. But, by-damn, it must have been such a furnace in there that there's precious little left to judge by."

"I expect you're right, Doc," the inspector from Witherley had said. "A man and a woman would tally, anyway. This fellow Engleton and his wife. I've established the fact that they lived here but nobody seems to know much about them, who they were or where they came from and so on."

"I don't know that it matters all that much now," the doctor said.

"I don't know that it does," the inspector agreed.

Unfortunately for the inspector's records George Hurd had been booked for a long distance three-day job on the very day of the fire.

After returning from Platts shortly after eleven he had set his alarm for half-past four and had gone straight to bed.

By five he was shaved, washed and dressed and opening up the garage.

By ten-past he was on his way to Colchester where he had to be at six o'clock precisely.

He was therefore temporarily unaware of all the excitement at Platts and so Inspector Hewlett had to continue in ignorance.

At one twenty-four, two days after her house had been burnt to the ground, Jean Engleton stepped on to the platform of Witherley Station.

She was feeling apprehensive yet fundamentally happy.

All the way from London she had been thinking over what John Thorpe had said to her. What they had said to one another.

"You've got to leave him, Jean. And you've got to leave the house. Platts. Sell it and if you feel generous—

though God knows why you should—give him half the proceeds. But only on condition that he will leave you for good and all. If he goes—and he will—then after the requisite time you can get legally free from him on a plea of desertion——”

“And then?”

He laid his firm, reassuring hand on hers and looked levelly into her eyes. “And then, my dear, you can do whatever you want to do. Maybe what we both want to do, eh?”

So she had at last made up her mind to sell Platts, a thing which she knew she would never have done at Arthur’s insistence but which now she was more than ready for.

She didn’t know what she had done to deserve the love and devotion of a man like John Thorpe but at least she could match them with a like love and devotion of her own. Out of a life which had degenerated into little but wreckage it seemed as though she might still have much happiness.

Witherley Station is never a very busy place; at one twenty-four it was somnolent. The London train was carrying a mere handful of passengers and among them Jean made her way now without seeing anyone she knew or who knew her.

She knew that a bus left the far end of the High Street at twenty-to-two and, wishing to avoid the expense of a taxi, she hurried along to catch it.

Like the train it was almost empty, people would not be coming back till later in the afternoon, and when the bus started Jean and a fat workman in overalls were the only passengers.

At the stop on the fringe of the town the bus stopped to pick up a woman whom Jean did not know but whom she recognised by sight as living in one of the smaller houses not far from Platts.

The woman, struggling with a parcel to get up the bus

steps, suddenly lifted her head and found herself face to face with Jean.

To Jean's astonishment her mouth sagged open, a look of incredulous fear invaded her eyes and she turned pale.

Gripping her awkward parcel again she went backwards down the bus steps a good deal more hurriedly than she had come up them.

The conductor looked on in annoyed disgust.

"Why don't they make up their minds," he grumbled aloud as he pressed the bell.

Jean was astonished at the woman's behaviour but could make nothing of it, and she let her thoughts turn where they wished to turn, to John Thorpe and what he had said to her, for the rest of the journey.

Nobody else got in the bus before she alighted at her stop.

She walked the short distance along the road to the front gate unaware yet of anything wrong for tall fir trees and a high hedge hid Platts from the road.

She turned in at the drive entrance and after taking a dozen steps came to an abrupt halt and stood there in stupefied astonishment.

For the first moment or so she couldn't take it all in.

The house had almost ceased to exist. Three blackened walls and the charred ends of some roof timbers pointing gauntly up at the sky, were all she could see.

The gravel in front of it and the lawn were littered with debris of every sort and the faint, frightening smell of burning still hung ominously in the air.

Two helmeted firemen were visible and a salvage unit car was drawn up at the side of the house. A policeman was standing gazing at the ruin and a handful of people Jean didn't know and couldn't place seemed to be inspecting the debris on the lawn, whilst three other cars were in the drive.

After standing there for a full minute taking in the scene and getting her mind to accept the only too obvious

facts Jean began to walk slowly across the grass picking her way between the ugly-looking piles of wreckage towards the house.

Platts was burnt . . . it was almost a relief, for now she would have to leave it. It was almost as though the house had made up her mind for her, and the suspicion of a smile came to her lips as she reflected that she would not be in the least surprised at such a thing happening . . .

No one had noticed her arrival, at any rate taken any heed of it and not seeing Arthur anywhere she thought she would get what information she could from the policeman.

Accordingly she began to walk towards him but before she could reach him a young man came round the corner of the house as though to make his way to one of the cars in the drive.

Seeing him Jean was pleased. She was beginning to feel rather like a ghost walking about unrecognised in her own house.

"Richard."

Young Richard Foster stopped dead as though the word had been a bullet.

He stared at her and the blood drained from his face . . . *the woman in the bus* Jean thought, and felt frightened herself at something unknown and strange . . .

"Richard," she repeated, moving forward.

The boy seemed slightly reassured by the repetition of his name. He took tentative steps towards her.

"Jean . . . God . . . I . . . we all thought you were dead, in there."

"I wasn't even here when it happened. In fact, I've only just come. Tell me."

"But——" he was staring at her still almost incredulously.

"Tell me, Richard—it's, it's a pretty bad sort of shock to come back home and find it like this."

"Of course. Come and sit in my car."

On the way to his car Jean asked, but by instinct she knew the answer.

"Where's Arthur? What about him?"

Richard Foster was too young to know how to wrap up what he had to say. Maybe no one would have known how to wrap it up.

"I'm afraid he's dead," he said. "He was in the house. I'm most frightfully sorry."

And then because Jean didn't say anything in reply he added: "We all thought you were in it with him, there was——"

Jean didn't realise that there might be implications to his unfinished sentence. She was thinking about Arthur, the man to whom she had been married. She was thinking that however badly things turn out you can't give yourself to a man, you can't share life with a person without losing something when he dies . . . She was thinking that when you had added up the meanness and the deception and the shiftiness to their pretty formidable total something over and above remained. And perhaps she hadn't let him make the most of it. He had had ability and now and again some sort of vision. He had written and he had wanted to write well. And his life had squandered and frittered itself away in the shoals and the sordid little backwaters. . . .

"Poor devil," she was thinking, "poor devil."

"Perhaps you had better come and have a word with the bobby," young Richard was saying, "and let him know that it wasn't—that you weren't—that you are still alive."

Jean nodded. "In a minute," she said.

"This must be appalling for you, coming back and finding things like this."

"It's a shock. I'd gone up to London. Really, I'd gone away from Platts if you want to know. And then to come back and—yes, it's a shock."

The young man essayed comfort.



“At least you’re alive,” he said, “that’s something.” And Jean responded gratefully, and even managed to smile a little.

“Yes, I’m alive,” she agreed, “and it’s a lot.”

“But what will you do Mrs. Engleton with your—with all your home gone and, and everything, what will you do?”

Jean Engleton put a hand on his for a moment and said:

“Don’t worry about me, Richard. You’ve always been sweet to me and I appreciate it. I always have done. Don’t worry about me. I shall find happiness. I know where to go for it and I shall find it.”

And getting out of the car she began to walk towards the policeman to tell him that she was still alive.

THE END





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